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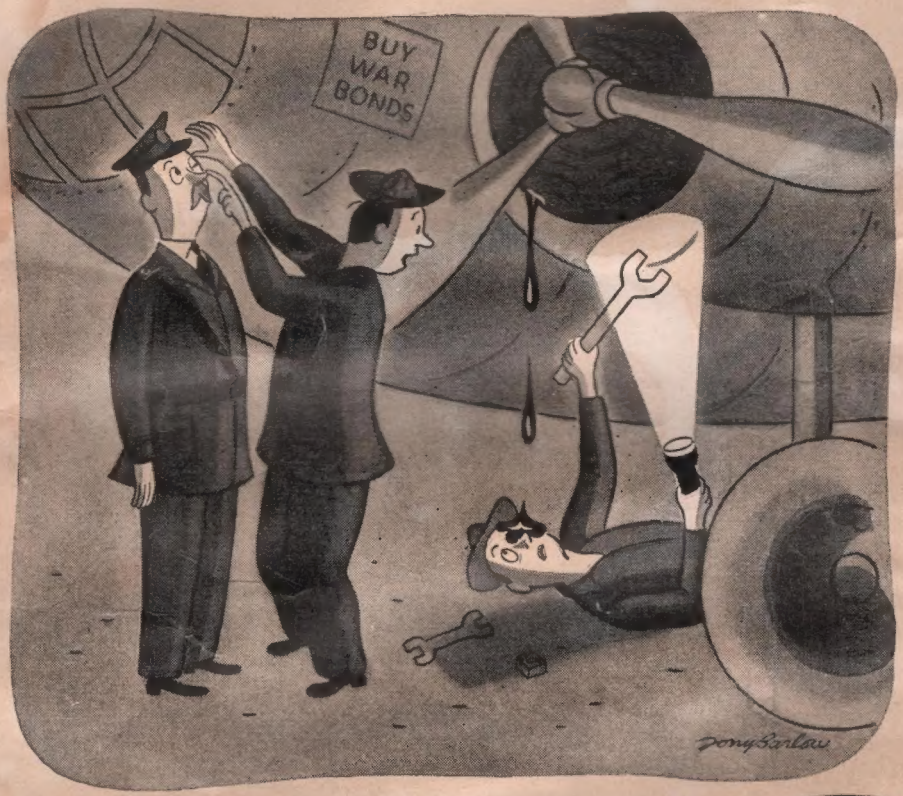

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The Rio Kid Western

Vol. VII, No. 3 *EVERY STORY BRAND NEW* April, 1943

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VALLEY OF VANISHED MEN

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Facing heavy odds, and laughing in the teeth of danger, the Rio Kid and his fighting aides dare to challenge the power of the deadly Lash Murratt gang of owlhoots! 15

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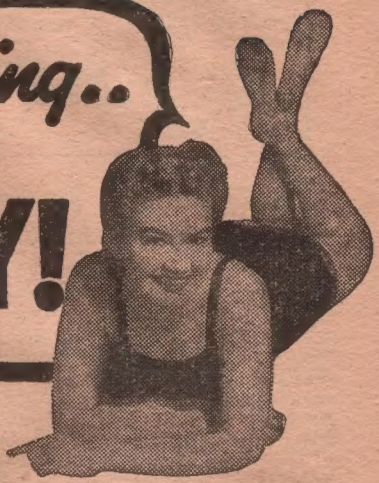
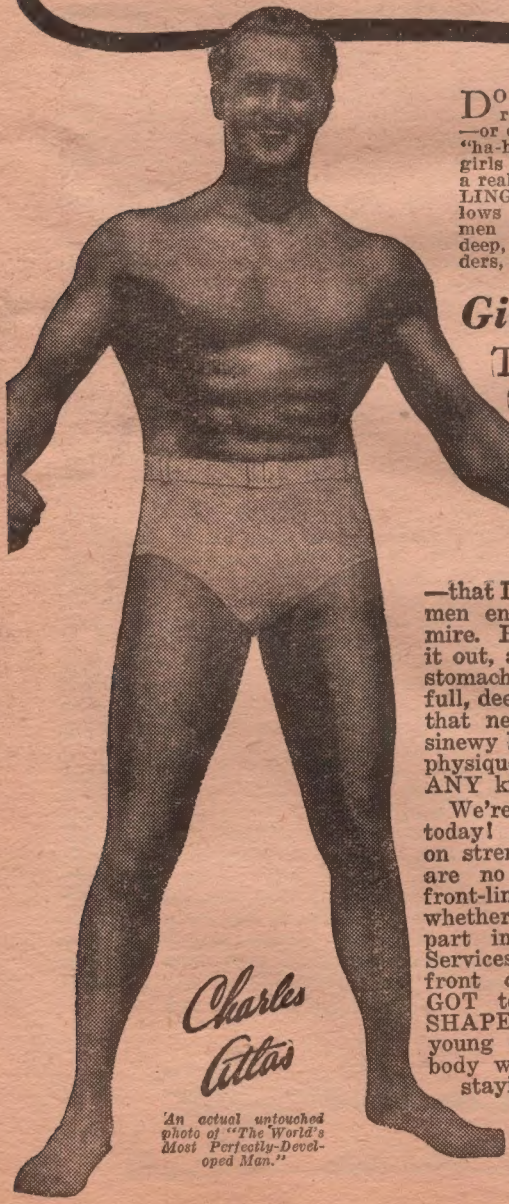


DO girls gasp in admiration at YOUR build—or do they give you the "ha-ha"? Believe me, the girls KNOW when you're a real HE-MAN—or a WEAKLING! And the kind of fellows they GO FOR are the men with *muscle:* men with deep, full chests, broad shoulders, brawny biceps! Men that can defend a girl—fight for her. What kind of man are YOU? If you don't measure up in physical strength, fitness, health, or vigor, then listen here:



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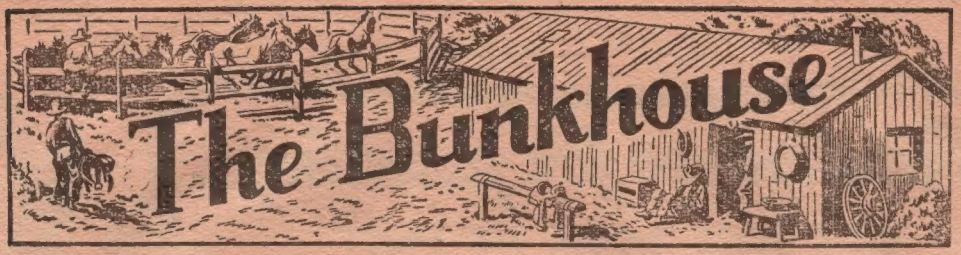

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HOWDY, waddies, welcome again to the Bunkhouse, but this time there will be no sitting outside in the shade of the cottonwoods or sitting in front of the Bunkhouse in the moonlight or gazing at the stars, because there is no shade, no moon or stars visible, but rather a blanket of snow covering most of the northern part of our country, and so instead of sitting outside we will just congregate around the old fireplace, put on a fresh backlog and begin our session of yarns.

There is nothing that can beat the comfort and cheerfulness of a blazing fire in an old-fashioned fireplace. It is conducive to deep thinking, it helps the memory to backtrack over the trails of yesteryear, and we dwell upon the thought of America, of what a glorious country it is, how our forefathers fought to win this country, then how more of them fought to win the West, and how down through the ages our forefathers and the last two generations have fought to maintain our standard of living.

As we sit in front of the fireplace the glow and warmth of the fire meets and mingles with that glow in the heart of every true American, and causes us, as we think back over the past and give some thought to the present, to be very proud that we are Americans.

American Heroes

Out on the far flung battlefields, in many parts of the world there are Americans, descendants of the brave men of Andrew Jackson's army, of the men who braved the winter at Valley Forge, of men who trekked westward to conquer what was then a wilderness, of men who fell with Custer in the battle of the Little Big Horn, and even descendants of those who helped in the massacres of Custer and his men, now united in one cause under one flag.

Descendants of men who fought with Lee united with descendants of Grant, all Americans, fighting that we may maintain American ways and standards, fighting a modernized, mechanized war, but fighting just as hard, and now hitting just as telling blows, as those blows which won American freedom.

They are the same kind of men as those who fought our other great battles and because they are the same kind of men we love to talk about those brave old characters who have passed on, of men who worried not about gasoline rationing when planning a trip but those who had to look well to their fire-arms, who had to see that the powder horn was well filled, that the bullet mold was not left behind, because upon those things depended life.

The pioneers of this country, those brave and hardy men who developed from a wilderness that glorious part of our country which we call the West, lived almost constantly in danger.

John Chisum

Such a man was John Chisum, and anyone well versed in the early days of the West could never screen or mentally visualize a panorama of a cavalcade of men who won the West without including John Chisum in the picture.

It was not a college education that made John Chisum a great man, for he had little education. It was not a frocktailed coat or high hat that made him one of the greatest of great cattle kings, because he never owned any such finery. It was the knack of looking ahead into the future, the will to work, the courage to fight for what is right, and the determination that will not permit one to admit defeat and quit, that carried him on and made him not only a cattle king but practically an empire builder.

A man like John Chisum, who moved from Texas to New Mexico, taking with him a herd of more than ten thousand cattle, over lands of mesquite, prickly pear, and cactus, through a country where outlaws, cattle rustlers and Indians were ever ready to pounce upon the unwary, to murder, to rob for little or big gain, deserves to have his name forever engraved upon any plaques honoring men who did big things for the upbuilding of our country.

(Continued on page 10)

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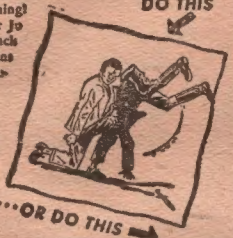

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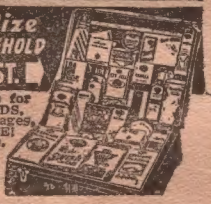

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 8)

Ten thousand head of cattle, along a wilderness trail, across the short-grass billows of a treeless and sometimes waterless country for nearly a thousand miles at an average speed of perhaps ten miles per day, ten thousand cattle strung out along what seemed an endless trail, strung to such a great length that its head dipped over one horizon long before its tail came over the other!

Courage and Determination

A man with such courage and determination deserved to be more than a petty overlord of a few scattered corrals, to have a standing denoting more bigness and power than just the name cattleman implies. He was a cattle king in every sense of the word, an unquestioned monarch holding dominion over vast herds and illimitable ranges. At the peak of his career, he owned more cattle than any other man in the United States, if not in all the world.

After landing and settling with his herd in New Mexico, he kept bringing in cattle from Texas. Fifteen thousand calves were born under his brand in one year, or at an average rate of one calf each 36 minutes day and night throughout the year. If all the cattle owned at one time by John Chisum had been strung out in single file, the trail herd would have reached from New York City far beyond the national capital city, Washington, D. C., or from New York City to around Boston and nearly back to New York.

Chisum was born in Tennessee in 1824. His forefathers came over in colonial times and settled in Virginia, and at the time of Chisum's birth Tennessee was a frontier state, and being born a frontiersman John

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Chisum's father Claiborn Chisum moved his family to Texas, to keep up with or beyond the Frontier. With household goods stowed in covered wagons, the family traveled through the wilderness country, crossed the Mississippi and finally settled in the Red River Valley, near where the thriving little city of Paris, Texas, now stands.

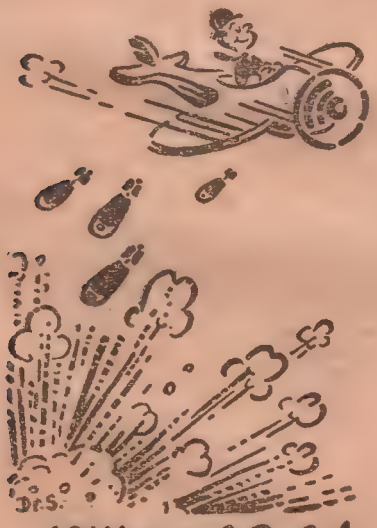
A Wild Range

This range was near the Red River, the border country of Texas and Indian Territory, and at the time was one of the wildest sections of the entire Southwest, because it was the gateway to the Indian country and there were bands of marauding Indians coming and going nearly all the time.

It was indeed a wild country for a thirteen-year-old boy, which was the age of John Chisum when the family settled in Texas, and it was also when Texas had enjoyed its freedom from Mexico less than a year. In fact, conditions were such that Texas had not had time or the means with which greatly to enjoy its freedom.

It was little less than a year after the great Battle of Sanjacinto, where Sam Houston led his army to victory over Santa Anna's Mexican army and gained the independence of Texas. Texas was then a republic and was being settled by people from another republic, the United States. So into this then foreign country which was Texas, into this wilderness, to wrest from it a fortune, or to die in the attempt as others had before and after him,

[*Turn page*]



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came the thirteen-year-old boy, John Chisum.

He Wanted Hard Work

Not many boys of that age of this day and time are overly concerned about the road they are going to follow to fortune. Most of them expect to gain a fortune in some manner and they dream of fortunes, but the road, the plan or method of gaining that fortune is seldom clear in a dream picture, and hard work, privations and danger are purposely blotted out of such fortune dreams by the youngsters. But from the manner in which young Chisum started to work he entertained no dreams of fortune without work.

There was plenty of land in Texas when the Chisums settled there. Land could be

FOGHORN CLANCY

had almost for a song; land was so cheap that Texas gave more than three and a half million acres for a capital building, and so John Chisum at an early age acquired land. He laid out the site of Paris on his land.

He helped to build the first house in this city of the future. He watched the town grow and as it grew, he grew in wealth. He became a contractor and builder. He built the first court house in Paris. He became a town builder almost within his youth. Later when he moved to New Mexico he became a state builder and still later in the Southwest he was an empire builder.

Open Range

He embarked in the cattle business in 1854 when he was just thirty years old. Any man could get into the cattle business in Texas in those days. There was open range, one did not even have to own the land to be a cattleman, and cattle were worth next to nothing. Their principal worth was their hides and the tallow that could be made from their carcasses, and while any man could get into the cattle business, to prosper in it one had to be smart, had to find a market for cattle, and after finding a market had to have the courage to take the risks necessary to get them to market.

There was not so much cattle stealing back in the 50's. Cattle were too cheap, but one had to have horses with which to handle the cattle, and horses were much scarcer than cattle, more valuable.

Indians in those days never killed just for the sake of getting beef to eat, they could get beef for the killing 'most anywhere, but horses, that was different, and horses that were broken to ride were also much more desired.

Any cowboy, no matter how tough, no matter how great a bronc rider or horse tamer he might be, always preferred a broken or half gentled horse to ride, especially if he was in a hurry to get somewhere, than to have to go to the trouble of catching a wild horse and breaking it before starting the journey, and that is one of the things that made cattle driving and owning a number of horses dangerous.

Four Sixes

For about three years Chisum made cattle drives east from Paris to Shreveport, on the Red River in Louisiana, from where his cattle were shipped by boat to market in Mississippi River towns — Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez and New Orleans. Then for better range he moved down about sixty miles into Denton County, down into the same country where the late S. Burk Burnett was said to have won the start of what was later a cattle empire of nearly two million acres, by holding four sixes in a poker game and thereby starting the famous Four 6-s brand.

Six years later John Chisum moved on west to the Concho River country. It was a great cattle country then and is still a great cattle country and its cattle and natural resources have made San Angelo a beautiful little city.

It was in 1867 that John Chisum left the Concho country of Texas and moved with ten thousand cattle to New Mexico. Texas had just won its independence when he moved into the state, but many things had transpired since he had been a resident. Texas had been admitted to the Union; it was no longer a foreign country, but a part of the United States of America. The Civil War had come, and for four years men from the Texas cattle country had gone forth to the battle fronts, leaving their droves of cattle with no one to look after them, thousands upon thousands of cattle.

Mavericks

Unbranded mavericks ran wild. Then, with the war over, the men came back to the range, back to herds of wild cattle that were practically worthless because there was little or no market, and because in the South and Southwest there was no money with which to buy.

(Continued on page 89)

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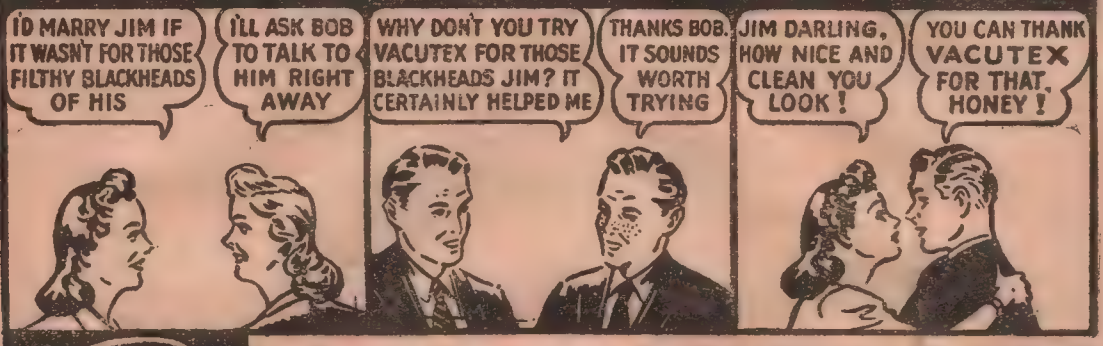
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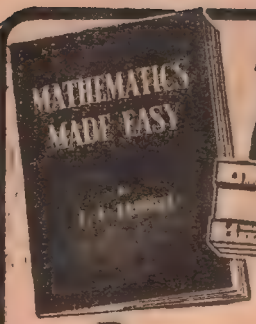

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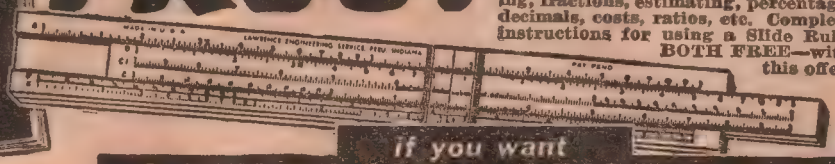

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"Murratt's gang is coming out!" cried Mireles (CHAPTER II)

VALLEY OF VANISHED MEN

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Facing heavy odds, and laughing in the teeth of danger, Bob Pryor and his fighting aides dare to challenge the power of the deadly Lash Murratt gang of owlhoots!

CHAPTER I

Birds of Death

THEY were the two birds of gold that opened up that trail of bloodshed and violence. A pair of eagles, gilded from beak to claw until they looked like living gold, led the Rio Kid to the valley of Vanished Men. . . .

Hunger and fear knifed "Drag" Rodell and "Gyp" Maxon, as they halted their jaded mounts on top of the rocky hill. They were hard-bitten men, thin-lipped and chill-eyed, killers.

Rodell rode high in his saddle, a stunted, sharp-faced man with pale, shifty eyes. His voice came harsh and scratchy through the silence.

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The Rio Kid Gallantly Braves Gunfire to

"Cuss you and yore quick gun!" he snarled to the man beside him. "If you hadn't shot that Prescott rancher we wouldn't have the Rio Kid on our tail. Three days without grub, just because yuh can't throw a gun without killin' somebody!"

"Yuh talk like yuh ain't got any notches on yore cutters!" Gyp Maxon sneered.

He was a slab-muscled man, sitting tense on the back of his trail-weary grulla. He was pig-jawed, and the restless glitter in his murky eyes spoke of something close to terror.

"Anyway, how was I to know the Rio Kid would come after us?" he grated.

Drag Rodell cursed. "All you thought of was cuttin' that rancher down," he rasped. "Shore, I'll plug a man, but I want to leave a cold trail when I do it. We couldn't have cooked a meal even if we'd had some grub, the way that Rio Kid devil has been crowdin' us."

Hunger and weariness and fear had worn down both outlaws until they were cross-grained, and raw malignancy flecked Gyp Maxon's red-rimmed eyes.

"We've lost him now, so stop yappin'!" he bit out.

Rodell hipped around in his saddle, his stunted body seeming too small for a man so filled with violence and evil. His lips peeled back from stained teeth, and his bony hands hooked out near his low-laced guns.

"You tellin' me what to do, Maxon?" he said defiantly.

MAXON stiffened, and kill heat flickered in his narrowed eyes. A nerve began jerking at the corner of his slotlike mouth, then he uttered a hoarse croak of a laugh.

"Ease off, Drag!" he blurted. "We're both as jumpy as a bear with sore hams. What's the sense of us fightin'? We're safe now. Lash Murratt and his gang are up in this end of the territory somewheres, and the Kid ain't fool enough to tail us in here. We got plenty time to rest and eat now."

"If we *had* somethin' tuh eat!" Drag Rodell snapped out savagely. "We ain't even seen a jack-rabbit in two days. I've got to have some food!"

Their hatred for each other was dulled by the grim knowledge that two hunters were twice as effective as one when it came to killing food on this barren, sun-hammered land. It was true that for two days they had seen no sign of life on the desert, and even the dog-sized jack-rabbits seemed to have fled the country.

Hunger was driving barbed spikes into their vitals, and now that they felt safe from the inexorable guns of the Rio Kid their keyed-up tension was giving way to waves of weakness. They were close to the madness of starvation, and they knew it. It jerked their eyes around in search of the least sign of life that meant food, and their hands were ever close to low-slung Colts.

"I can't go no farther," Drag Rodell said hoarsely. "We'll build a fire, and then start huntin'. I'm goin' to have somethin' to eat if I have to kill snakes."

They dropped heavily from their jaded horses. Here on the top of the hog-backed hill was a jutting outcrop of granite, and they built their fire between two sun-blistered rocks. It was an ideal camp for two killers on the dodge. The boulders offered them protection, and the barren lift of the hill commanded the arid wastes spreading out around them.

As they fanned the flames of their campfire into life, their eyes were wary and alert. But they didn't see the two riders peering narrowly over the rim of the draw half a mile to the south.

"The keelers, they are on that hill-hump over there, my General," one of those riders, Celestino Mireles, said softly.

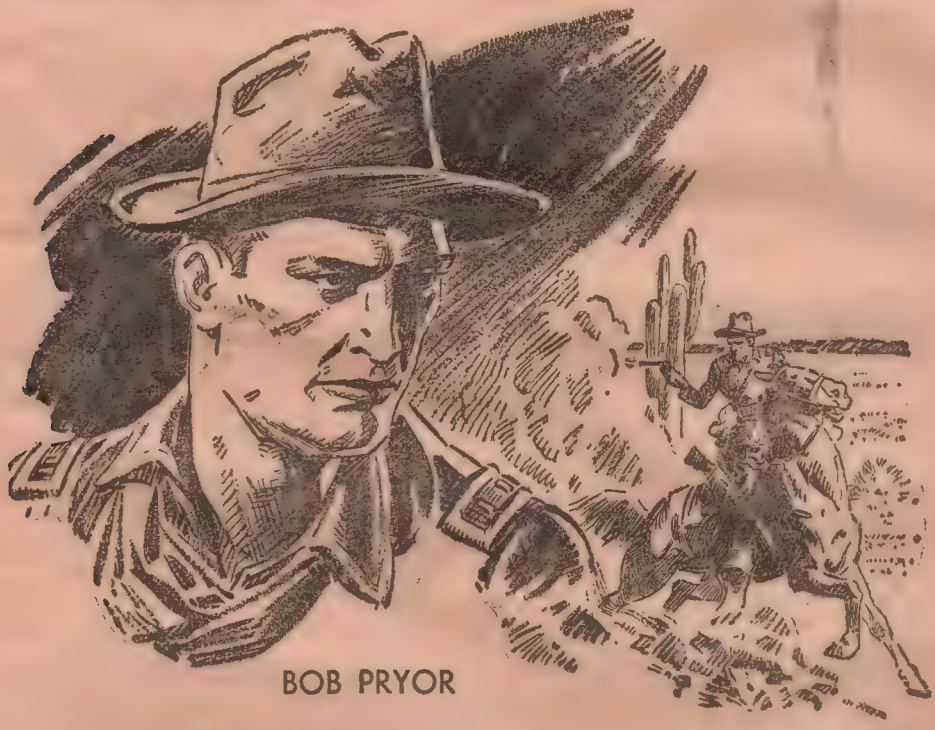
Bob Pryor, more famously known and feared as the Rio Kid, nodded grimly as he swung out of saddle to slip into the rocks for a better view. Mireles dismounted, too, leaving their mounts hidden.

Rescue Imperilled Wagon Train Folk!

"We've run 'em down," Pryor said in a cool drawl. "They ain't had a chance to eat in two days, and their hosses are run down. We'll get them two polecats!"

Nor did Drag Rodell or Gyp Maxon see the band of riders in the mesquite tangle a quarter of a mile to the north of the hill.

Those riders were the outcasts of a dozen Frontier towns, gunhung, chill-eyed men who knew no law save that of the flaming Colt.



BOB PRYOR

One of them, a man known as "Jap" Teague, broke their hard-lipped silence. He was a thin rail of a man, with a high-boned sallow face and tawny, almond-shaped eyes. When he spoke, his toneless voice seemed to come from his throat, with no movement of his mouth.

"I know them two! Drag Rodell and Gyp Maxon. They're all right, Boss."

ANOTHER of the outlaws, "Dutch" Kohler, grunted acidly. He was a thick-shouldered individual, with a heavy expressionless face and pale bulging eyes.

"*Ja!* They're all right!" There was a sneer in his guttural growl. "They're brave. *Ja!* Almost they killed their horses running from the two men we saw on their trail."

"Lash" Murratt, who bossed the outlaw pack, was a man whose deadliness was portrayed in every line of his powerful frame. He was tall and raw-boned, oddly catlike in his movements, as though he were always cocked and ready to explode into violent action. He had a blunt shelf of a jaw under the thin slash of his mouth, and black, smoldering eyes too close together over the sharp ridge of his nose.

There was cruel finality in the roll of his voice.

"If it takes only two men to spook them fellers Rodell and Maxon, we don't want 'em," he grated. "If we ever find that lost Cudahay gold, we'll have to fight to keep it. I want guns I can trust."

Every man present understood that,

and the job ahead of them. Somewhere up here was a lost wagon train that had freighted a hundred thousand dollars in gold. They would have to kill to get that gold; they would have to kill to keep it.

With narrowed eyes they watched Drag Rodell and Gyp Maxon knowing that hunger was driving the two men desperate. The outlaw band saw them kick through the rocks, and scare up a single chuckwalla, but the lizard escaped their frantic rush, scuttled into the crevice of a boulder that reflected heat like an oven wall.

THEY scrambled after it, cursing and snarling. They saw the lizard deep in the crevice, but they didn't get it. The chuckwalla puffed out its loose and leathery skin into every seam and crack of the crevice.

Snarling like an animal, Maxon gripped the horny tail, twisted and jerked savagely. The tail came off without budging the chuckwalla. Maxon looked around, the sight of food so close and so impossible to get, making his eyes wild.

"I've got to have something to eat!" he choked hoarsely.

"Shut up!" Drag Rodell rasped.

He was looking up, and Maxon followed the slender gunman's stare into the heat-paled sky.

Maxon thought he had gone crazy at first. He had never heard of birds of that color. They were soaring toward the point of the hill on a downdraft of air, two eagles that gleamed in the sun like burnished gold. They were golden from beak to tail, each spread feather casting a metallic glint in the sunlight's glare.

Then Rodell's gun was swinging up, following the flight of the nearest bird.

Gyp Maxon was holding his breath, afraid of startling the birds away. But the eagles of gold floated closer. Rodell's gun crashed, and the eagle's scream pierced the blare of the shot. The bird fluttered in mid-flight, then its wings folded, and it came plummeting down to hit the ground within feet of the burning campfire.

"Yuh got it!" Maxon yelled, and the two killers went scrambling wildly toward the dead bird.

CHAPTER II

Murder Flies Low

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR was a man who had lived through those bitter and bloody years of the Civil War. He had joined the Union Army because in him burned a strong and unquenchable conviction that his homeland was nothing unless it remained one People, symbolized by one Flag, a nation of and for and by free and equal men—the United States of America.

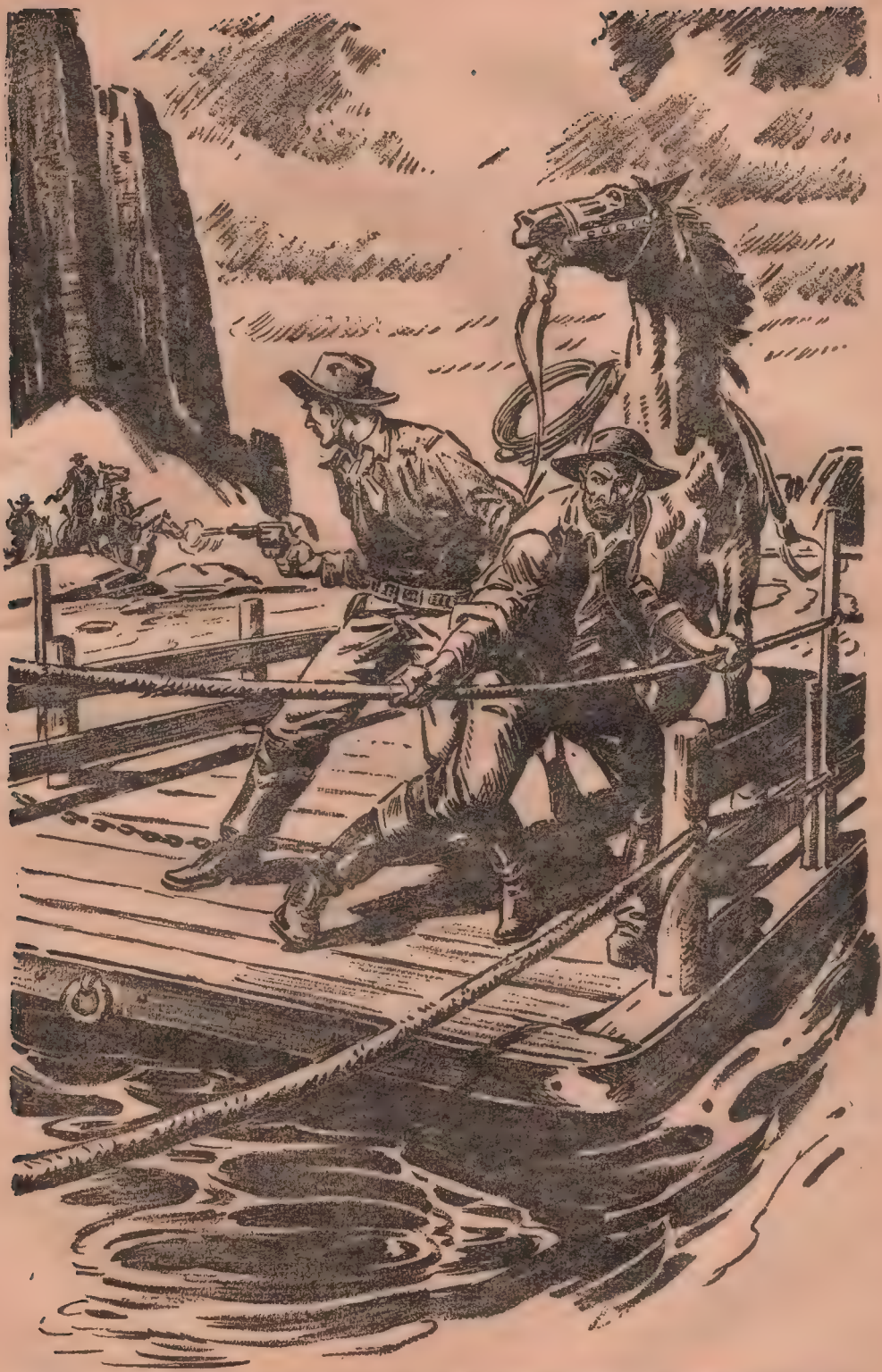
He had seen men die to weld the North and the South into a solid and unbreakable nation. He had felt pride throb through his veins when, after the War, he had watched battle-scarred Confederates salute as they watched the Stars and Stripes pulled to the top of a high mast, and he heard them say:

"We had our Cause, and we fought for it, which is all any man can do. There'll always be a North and South, but if any country ever figures on moving in here, they'll have a lot of tough customers to lick."

But although peace had at last come to the States, the war had not ended for Bob Pryor. He had returned home to find his mother and father and many of his friends murdered by outlaws who had laid claim to the West.

Hot lead and powdersmoke had given him the name he now bore, a name that was both feared and honored throughout the Frontier—the Rio Kid. For as he had once fought to keep the States together, he now waged inexorable war to make the Frontier safe for honest men.

He made a striking picture against the barren slopes of the draw as he watched the drama being played out before his eyes. His Stetson was worn at a rakish angle that was reminiscent of his cavalry days, and the shadow cast by the high sun slanted across his crisp chestnut hair. The elements had darkened his face to a deep bronze. His were the cool blue eyes of a man



Tilting his gun against the too-great distance, Pryor hurled three quick shots at the outlaws (CHAPTER VIII)

born to lead and command, but in them was a devil-may-care glint that showed the reckless courage of his kind.

The habits he had learned while in the Service had never been forgotten. He sat erect and balanced in his saddle, his wide shoulders square. He was the ideal height and weight for a cavalryman. He wore blue breeches tucked into polished Army boots with silver Army spurs. But where he once had worn a cavalryman's saber, his lean waist was now girded by heavy cartridge belts, with Army Colts in his holsters.

His wide mouth, usually showing good humor and love of life, was thin-pinched now with grimness, as he stared across the rim of the draw toward the two killers on the hill half a mile away.

"I'd like to take them two without a fight if we can," he said quietly to the young Mexican beside him. "Rodell and Maxon are a long time overdue a law rope."

There was bitterness in his low tone that he did not try to conceal. The picture of that Prescott rancher dying from slugs fired into his stomach, of the rancher's young wife silently weeping, still haunted the Rio Kid's mind.

"*Si*, General," Celestino Mireles said. "But those men in the mesquite beyond the hill, they might try to stop us."

The Rio Kid nodded. "Lash Murratt's outfit, if my guess is any good," he muttered. "That gang needs cleanin' out, but Rodell and Maxon come first. One way or another, we're squarin' up for that rancher!"

YOUNG Mireles smiled thinly. He was a slender youth, not long out of his teens, but there was a competence about him that made him stand out in any man's company. He sat his horse with the indolent ease of a born rider, his face calm and darkly handsome. His mouth was strong and firmly curved, and his dark eyes were spaced wide on either side of an aquiline nose.

His clothes made him the patrician don of his forbears—a high-peaked sombrero, flare-bottomed velvet pants circled at the waist by a flame-red sash that held his guns and knife.

Always he referred to the Rio Kid as "General". It was a name he had used since Bob Pryor had rescued him from the gang of Border killers who had looted his home in Mexico and murdered his father. Since that time he had cast his lot with Pryor, becoming an aide who had many times meant the difference between life and death for the Rio Kid.

"We go after them now, yes?" young Mireles murmured. His voice, so soft in its inflections as to be almost musical, was edged with a grim note now.

The Rio Kid shook his head. "No sense rushin' this," he said quietly. "There's something strange in the way Murratt's gang keep hidden in the mesquite. They don't know we've seen 'em, that's shore. Still, mebbe they're usin' Rodell and Maxon for bait to catch us in a whip-saw. We'll wait a while and see if they'll open the play."

But the next minute brought a sudden and puzzling break in the deadlock. With his eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun, the Rio Kid saw the two killers on the hill abruptly halt their mad scrambling for the chuckwalla. Drag Rodell froze, his narrow face turned skyward, and then Pryor saw the two eagles floating in.

Two birds of gold! Amazement held the Rio Kid.

"No eagle was ever hatched that color," he declared. "Somebody painted 'em gold! But why?"

The answer came, even more amazing, after death had cut down one of the soaring birds. The desert air telescoped the distance, bringing the details sharp and clear to the Kid's keen vision.

He saw Drag Rodell's gun jump, blowing out a black ball of smoke, and almost instantly heard the solid blast of the shot. The eagle lurched in midflight. Its wings fluttered, throwing off golden splinters of reflected light, then it went plummeting lifelessly to the earth.

The two killers stumbled toward the dead bird. Gyp Maxon reached it first. He kicked it over with his boot, then suddenly dropped to his knees beside it. His hands went to one of

the eagle's legs, then came up, gripping something that flickered white in the sunlight.

"General, eet was a piece of paper he took from the eagle's leg!" Celestino Mireles said tensely.

"Someone tied that paper there for a good reason," the Rio Kid's voice was low. "We've got to find out why."

He shot a glance to the east, marking the flight of the surviving golden eagle toward a looming rust-red butte several miles away. Then came young Mireles' sharp cry.

"Murratt's gang is coming out!"

PRYOR could see the killer pack swing into movement. There was something deadly about them, a bunched knot of men driving rapidly into a full run. The Rio Kid and Mireles raced for their own horses and mounted.

"They're after that paper!" Pryor bit out. "Let's go, Celestino!"

The Rio Kid's mount needed no urging. It seemed to sense the fight coming, and lunged forward eagerly to meet it. But that was instinctive in Saber, the horse Bob Pryor would not have exchanged for any other alive.

Saber was a big dun, marked down the back with the stripe of the "breed that never dies". And the dun was indeed a prize in a land that valued fine horses almost as much as life itself, though no beauty. Rangy, and sporting one mirled eye, Saber had a mean temper with anyone except Pryor and his friends, as well as with other horses. But he also had an intelligence that made him an equine demon in a fight, kicking, biting, smashing his way through all opposition.

Even as the Rio Kid hurtled out of the draw, he saw Rodell and Maxon swing around at the sound of Lash Murratt's onrushing outlaws. They read their fate in their first flashing glance, and Rodell's yell ripped out, high-pitched with fear.

"We're with yuh, Murratt! We're on yore side!"

But that did no good. They were marked for death, and they knew it. And the Rio Kid knew it. He saw the guns of the killer gang flung up, but they held their fire. They were too practised in murder and bloodshed to waste powder or lead. They swept on up the rocky slope, fanning out slightly.

"Here comes them two out of the draw!" one of them yelled through the pounding of hoofs.

The gang split with the same deadly impulse, half racing on toward Rodell and Maxon, the other half quartering the hill toward Pryor and young Mireles.

A hard grin was on the Rio Kid's lips as he pulled his heavy guns. There were five in the gang cutting him off, but he raced straight toward them, Saber stretching out in a wild burst of speed.

But Pryor knew he would never reach the crest of the hill in time. He saw Drag Rodell and Gyp Maxon whip out their guns, hurling their slugs frantically. One of the outlaws jerked under the shock of lead, loosened in his saddle and went down, but that didn't dull the savage charge of Lash Murratt's killers.

"Take 'em, boys!" came Murratt's harsh shout. "And get that paper!"

Outlaw guns crashed. Drag Rodell's stunted body shivered as lead tore through it, and his legs seemed to melt under him. Terror drove all the fight out of Gyp Maxon. He whirled, trying to run for the cover of the boulders, but he never lived to finish his first stride.

SLUGS smashed into his back, knocked him forward in a loose, stumbling fall. He hit the ground, skidding through the glowing coals of the campfire, and Pryor saw a bright flare as the flames caught the paper in the gunman's dead hand.

Fury ripped through Murratt's savage yell.

"Yuh fools! Yuh dropped him too soon! The fire got the paper!"

Then the wild shout of one of the killers down the hill whirled the outlaw leader around.

"Murratt! There's the Rio Kid comin' in!"

At the sound of the Rio Kid's name Lash Murratt yelled orders to his men, forgetting the burning paper in the storminess of his hatred.

"He's playin' in the wrong yard this time!" he howled with a curse. "Cut

that devil down, yuh gun-slammers! I swore I'd have his ears to wear if I ever met up with him!"

Then Lash Murratt and his killers came plunging down the slope to meet the Rio Kid's grim charge.

It was a fight of which the Rio Kid had never seen the equal in all the bullet-studded trails he had ridden. He and young Mireles were hopelessly outnumbered, and yet riding with them was a reputation that struck fear into the converging outlaws.

They were but two against many, but the thought of turning back never occurred to them. Such a move would be more certainly fatal than a reckless frontal attack. Pryor knew this from grim experience during the War.

And it was this same unswerving charge against superior odds that unsettled the outlaw gang. Men of their murderous breed could not understand such a suicidal attack by two lone men. They bunched together when they should have fanned out, and because of that they offered targets that the guns of the Rio Kid could not miss.

He saw one of his slugs cut a crimson furrow across the cheek of one of the outlaws. Another of the gang lurched in his saddle, his scream of agony ripping through the racket of pounding hoofs and crashing guns. Lead was whining through the air all around Bob Pryor, ugly whispers of death that rasped their futile warnings in his ears.

That this reckless charge against Lash Murratt's trained killers was suicidal, the Kid well knew. A thought flashed that this must be the climax toward which his life had been shaping up—a final and unavoidable clash with outlaws, an exit with lead whining in his ears and powdersmoke clogging his nostrils. But that was the way he had always wanted the end to come.

The end? The thought was a spur to his courage. He was not afraid to die, but he was not ready to die yet. There was too much work left to be done, too many wrongs to be righted. But there was nothing he could do about it, not with Lash Murratt's killers so close ahead, with their slugs making a hail of lead in the air around him.

And through that turmoil, he heard the high-ringing cry of young Mireles from behind him.

"General, they are too many! Come back—come back!"

THE Rio Kid's harsh laugh rang out.

"They'd cut us down anyhow!" he threw back over his shoulder. "Run for it, Celestino! I'll hold 'em off!"

But he knew the unflinching courage of the young Mexican behind him too well to expect Celestino Mireles to abandon him. Mireles' horse came pounding up to Saber's side and from the corner of his eye Pryor saw the familiar grin that twisted the youth's mouth.

Mireless was throwing his shots with deadly accuracy, each kick of his weapon spilling a black banner of powdersmoke past his face.

Lead caught another of the killers, the shock of the slug picking the man bodily out of his saddle and knocking him around loosely. Fear hammered into the ranks of the outlaws, jumping from one man to the next. Pryor saw Jap Teague rein his mount around cruelly, squalling an oath of terror.

"Run for it! We can't drop them hellions!"

But Lash Murratt's furious shout halted the flight of the gang.

"We've got 'em four to one! They ain't too tough for lead to stop! I'll kill the first one of yuh that tries to break away!"

Murratt's face was a vicious mask of hatred. Close ahead of Saber's flashing hoofs, the Rio Kid saw the gun in the hand of the killer boss chop down murderously.

Pryor twisted and ducked desperately to one side, felt the hot slash of the slug across his ribs. He threw a slug at Murratt, but knew instantly he had missed the outlaw leader's rapidly moving body.

The yards between Saber and the killer pack were closed with deadly swiftness, and through the chaos of sound the Rio Kid heard young Mireles' piercing cry.

"General, we have ride together! We will die together!"

CHAPTER III

Guns of the Rio Kid

THE outlaw pack came rushing in toward Bob Pryor's pounding mount. He saw fear twist the face of an outlaw he recognized as Hank Wordeen. Wordeen was at the head of the gang now, and he tried to whip his horse out of the line of Pryor's charge, but he had no time.

Saber hit Wordeen's bay gelding full on. The impact was terrific, a solid smash of flesh against flesh. But if Saber felt pain, the dun didn't show it. He went kicking and biting straight into the knot of killers, the sheer fury of his attack driving the outlaws' horses before him. He bored his way into that close-packed wall of flesh and bone, an equine devil that knew no such thing as defeat.

In such close quarters there was no chance for accurate shooting. Faces were a blur, then one outlaw's face loomed in front of the Kid behind a clubbing gun. Pryor's Colt curved in an arc and swung, and he saw the face melt out of sight. Someone was cursing in a pain-choked voice.

"He busted my arm! Drop that devil!"

Mireles was caught in a tangle of snarling men. A gun whipped up in the hand of one of the killers, and fear for his friend sickened the Rio Kid.

He yelled a warning at the young Mexican, but that did no good. He saw the killer's gun flare, saw the side of Celestino's head turn red. Then Mireles was going down, loose-muscled, still trying to fight with strength that no longer was in his body.

A storm of rage swept the Rio Kid. He cursed and yelled, trying to smash the outlaw pack away with his clubbing guns. But they kept boring in, piling against him through the sheer weight of their numbers. He saw Lash Murratt come forging up close to him, lips peeled back from clenched teeth in a murderous grin.

Murratt's gun jabbed toward Pryor's stomach viciously. The Rio Kid tried to knock the weapon away, but someone caught his arms, pinned them down. Murratt's hate-twisted face loomed closer, and the killer's venomous snarl came chopping into the Kid's brain.

"I said I'd wear yore ears if I ever met yuh!"

Then Lash Murratt's gun roared. A hard fist seemed to smash into the Rio Kid's middle. The breath *swooshed* from his lungs, and sickness that seemed to take possession of his whole body overwhelmed him.

He was falling, but he could do nothing about it. He knew he hit the ground, but felt no shock of pain. He rolled over, face up, but only dimly conscious of what was transpiring. He saw horses plunging all around him, and wondered vaguely if any of those milling hoofs would crush his body. But rapidly his senses dimmed until he knew no more. . . .

The Rio Kid came to, spread-eagled on the ground, with his arms and legs bound to deep-driven stakes. His vision was fogged, but he managed to shake his head slightly to clear it. Lash Murratt and his outlaws were standing around, grinning with brutal mirth, and Murratt's harsh laugh came uproariously.

"So yuh're that Rio Kid sidewinder!" he jeered. "Yuh don't look so tough now."

PAIN was in Pryor's stomach near where the slug had struck, and he was amazed that he was still alive. Murratt's unblinking stare seemed to probe his thoughts.

"Yeah, yuh're alive, all right! If it'll make yuh feel any better, my slug won't kill yuh. It hit yore belt-buckle, but it shore used up yore luck. We figgered we'd just leave yuh here to think things over—sort of repent for the error of yore ways!"

A cruel snicker of amusement ran through the gang. Dutch Kohler chuckled gutturally.

"*Ja*, it iss a picture no artist could paint! I vould like to see every lawman staked out like that!"

So it was that way! The meaning stabbed into the Rio Kid's brain, cold and terrible. The old Indian trick of

torture—a man staked out on the ground and left to the mercy of the desert sun.

An outlaw he knew was Bruno Galt grinned crookedly.

"Yuh've still got a chance left," he jeered. "The sun will be down in three-four hours, so it won't have time to kill yuh tonight. But yuh might have to argue a little with them ants!"

Galt pointed a rigid finger to the ground beside the Kid. Pryor rolled his eyes, and horror chilled him. But he might have known it! He was staked out near a hill of large black ants. Already they were stringing out across the ground, like a miniature black army marching toward him.

One of them climbed to the back of his rope-tied hand. He shook his hand, but he could not dislodge the ant. He felt the sharp needle bite in his sweaty flesh, and knew what lay in store for him. Those tiny devils would be swarming all over him within minutes. They would crawl over his face and into his eyes and ears. They could drive a man stark mad in an hour, but in that hour he would die a thousand deaths.

But the Rio Kid allowed no fear to show in his face. He refused to give the killers that satisfaction. They stood around him, staring down mockingly.

"Too bad yore Mex pard didn't live to join yore party," Jap Teague sneered. "He was lucky, gettin' his quick."

Pryor's glance shifted along the rocky slant of the hill. The body of the young Mexican was huddled there, the side of his boyish face dark with blood from the bullet gash in his temple.

But only a bitter fatalism showed in the Rio Kid's face. This was the way Celestino Mireles had always wanted it.

Pryor met Teague's stare in tight-lipped contempt.

"Yuh got us," he said hoarsely, "but there'll be more comin' after us. Polecats like you can't last forever. Yuh think yuh can tromp down honest men, take whatever yuh want, but they always get yore breed in the end."

Teague's boot smashed against Pryor's ribs, exploding pain through the Kid's body.

"Still tough, huh?" the killer snarled.

"Let him alone, Jap," Lash Murratt growled. "Give the ants a chance."

A LINE of fire was crawling up the Rio Kid's neck, spreading as the ants grew in numbers. In spite of his effort to suppress it, a shudder rippled the length of his frame. Murratt chuckled tauntingly.

"Beginnin' to feel 'em, huh, Kid? I'll give yuh somethin' to keep yore mind off the ants while they work.

"That piece of paper Gyp Maxon took off the gold eagle was burned, but I could still make out some of the words. It was a scrap of a Virginia City newspaper, dated Eighteen-sixty-two—seven years ago! It had some writin' on it, like somebody was callin' for help—and one of them words was the name Cudahay! That mean anything to you, Rio Kid?"

Memory came swiftly to the Rio Kid with the mention of that name, Cudahay. He knew the story connected with it, a tragedy not many years past.

A wagon train commanded by "Big John" Cudahay had left Virginia City in 1862, freighting a fortune in gold south through Nevada and Utah. The gold had been meant for the Confederate army, which was being strangled financially by the Union blockade. The hundred thousand dollars which had been secretly contributed by Southern sympathizers in the Nevada-California gold mines, would have gone far toward winning the war for the South.

But it never reached its destination. Three weeks south out of Virginia City, the wagon train had disappeared, literally vanished from the face of the earth, leaving no trace or trail. More than that, a troop of Union cavalrymen under the command of Captain Bill Hayden had disappeared in Utah territory at that same time!

"We've been tryin' to pick up some sign of that lost wagon train for two months," Lash Murratt growled, "and I've got a hunch that same message is on the eagle that wasn't shot. We're after that Confederate gold, and we're

goin' to get it! That's somethin' for yuh to think about!"

"What yuh do to me makes no difference, Murratt," the Rio Kid said tightly. "I'm not askin' anything for myself. But there was women and kids with Cudahay's outfit, and if they're still alive they need help. Murratt—can't yuh think of them women and kids?"

Lash Murratt grinned derisively. "I'll let you worry about them," he mocked. "My job is to worry about that gold."

He swung around bleakly, throwing a derisive taunt over his shoulder.

"Take good care of them ants, Kid," he said. "We've got that painted bird to hunt down and kill."

The Rio Kid's lips were tightly locked as he watched the outlaws stalk off. Talk would do no good, and he didn't try it. They swung onto their horses, and without a backward glance reined down the hill.

Silence closed in. The heat was smothering, but it was only a forerunner of the torture yet to come. The Rio Kid felt as if his flesh was being covered with a sheet of crawling flame. The ants were everywhere, their needle bites fraying out his nerves.

One of them was crawling around the corner of his tight-bitten lips. Another, so close as to be magnified until it looked like some prehistoric monster, was working closer to his eyes. If they got into his eyes, he would be raving mad within minutes.

There was something ironic in that realization. It made him feel small and powerless. A man could build towns, could span rivers and harness the winds to pump water, but he could be killed by such tiny creatures as ants.

BUT the Rio Kid knew that when that army of ants bit into him they would kill him. It brought a horror that he had never before experienced as the ants marched in ever increasing numbers across his face. He closed his eyes against the tiny daggers of pain they brought.

He didn't know how long he kept his eyes shut, because time had suddenly ceased to exist. And then, close

The Rio Kid saw death in the mind of every man in the close-packed mob (CHAPTER VIII)

by, he heard a low scuffing sound, heard labored breathing. He opened his eyes, and saw a bloody face bending over him.

"Eet ees all right, General," said Celestino Mireles' soft voice. "I weel cut you free."

Relief such as he had never felt was in Bob Pryor's chuckle as he felt his bonds give way to Celestino's sharp knife. Quickly he shed his clothing to rid himself of the ants, but as speedily he dressed. For he was impatient now for action.

"When I first saw yuh, I thought I was either loco or dead," he said to the young Mexican.

Celestino Mireles explored the bandage Pryor had placed around his head with the tips of his fingers. He grinned, but pain made a drawn mask of his handsome face.

"My skull she must be ver' hard, for to bounce off that bullet," he said. "I woke up while they were tying you to the stakes, my General. I wanted to help you then, but I knew they would keel us. So I let them theenk I was dead, and waited. When I crawled here and saw you with the ants all over—"

His voice trailed off, and an involuntary shudder rippled his slender frame.

The Rio Kid smiled. He made no mention of his gratitude, for these two knew each other too well for that. It was enough to know that either would risk his life for the other—and often had. But those moments of danger and service had strengthened the faith and understanding between them.

"Mebbe we'd better take a look at that gold-painted eagle," the Rio Kid suggested.

Celestino nodded. He flinched as he started up the slope, and Pryor's voice sharpened anxiously.

"What's the matter, Celestino?"

The young Mexican chuckled quietly. "Eet ees not much," he said. "My shirt tail she was pulled out when I fell to the ground. I could not move because the outlaws would see me." He reached behind him, rubbing gently as he grinned. "While I was lying there, the sun she burned me on the back of my stomach."

The dead bird was no surprise to Pryor. The eagle's feathers had been gilded so that now, in death, it looked as though it had been molded from solid gold.

"What do you theenk about thees?" young Mireles asked.

The Rio Kid frowned slightly, his eyes brooding.

"Any way yuh look at it, it adds up the same way," he said softly. "The way I figure, Captain Pierce's Union cavalry caught up with Cudahay's wagon train. There was probably a fight, and some of 'em got out of it alive. How or why they didn't shove on to civilization I don't know. But some of 'em are still alive, and the gold is probably with them."

"But why call for help by tying a note on thees bird?" Mireles wondered. "And why have they painted eet gold?"

BOB PRYOR'S lips creased into a thin, hard line.

"Gildin' the bird ain't so hard to figger out," he said thoughtfully. "Somebody done that to attract attention to the bird. Whoever saw a gold eagle flyin' around would want to capture it or kill it. Then they'd find the note."

Excitement was bringing color back into Celestino Mireles' face.

"Mebbe thees ees the answer, General!" he said. "Mebbe only a bird could get out of where the lost wagon train is. Mebbe Cudahay's outfit—and the soldiers—are trapped in a canyon somewhere. Or held captive by outlaws."

"I'm bettin' on the canyon," the Rio Kid stated flatly. "They wouldn't have lived this long if they'd been caught by an outlaw gang. The outlaws would have taken the gold, and killed everybody who could talk."

They turned under a common thought, moving toward their horses down the slope. Reaching them, they swung into their saddles, and the young Mexican slanted a meaningful glance at Pryor.

"We go after the other eagle, General?"

The Rio Kid nodded. "We're takin' a long chance tyin' into Murratt's killers again," he said. "But if they get the note that's probably on the other

eagle, they'll go after the gold, and nothin' could save Cudahay's lost outfit then."

CHAPTER IV

Wings of Destiny

ANGLING across the skirts of the hill, Pryor and Mireles rode down onto the flats. Pryor made no effort to keep under cover, risking everything on the need of locating Murratt's outlaw gang as soon as possible. For they must be found before they hunted down the gilded eagle.

There could be only one result once those killers located the lost wagon train. For once they got the gold they would follow the only rule they knew —"Dead men do not talk!"

The westering sun was a fire-red ball hanging sullenly over the ragged rim of the world, and shadows were stretching away from cactus and yucca. Even at this hour when the air was beginning to cool, there was no life on the desert. Long weeks of drought had withered what vegetation there was, and thirst had driven all living things closer to the few remaining waterholes.

The Rio Kid's practised eye located water that even an Indian would have had difficulty in finding.

"We'd better water up while we can," he said to Mireles.

He headed Saber into a mesquite clump, but the waterhole hidden in there was an empty pit bedded and walled with sun-cracked mud. Celestino shook his head.

"The hole ees dried up, General," he said.

"Mebbe not," Bob Pryor drawled.

With a touch of his rein, he started Saber milling around in the empty hole. The giant dun worked up the mud, his hoofs pounding deep into the gravelly sand. Then Pryor swung Saber off to one side, dropped to the ground, and began scooping out the loose sand. Moisture seeped in slowly, forming a pool where before there had been only mud.

"Lots of men have died from thirst with water right under them," he said with a dry grin.

They drank, and watered their mounts carefully, then moved on at a mile-eating trot. Pryor rode erect in his saddle, his narrowed glance shifting restlessly over the rust-red bulk of the butte drawing near. But nowhere did he see any sign of Lash Murratt's outlaw gang.

"They could be a dozen places watchin' us and we couldn't see them," the Kid muttered.

The gray haze of dusk was rolling in, and darkness was not far off. They reached the first up-swing of the butte and Pryor reined in, a thoughtful frown pinching his brows.

"This is the only high spot within miles," he said, "and it's a shore bet that eagle came here. But findin' it won't be an easy job."

Celestino Mireles nodded, memory stirring bitterness into his young face.

"That ees true, General. When I was a leetle *muchacho,* my father once said to me, 'My son, the guns of man have keeled off many birds and animals, but they weel never destroy all the eagles. The eagle ees too smart and too wild. Some day I weel show you.' And then those raiders came—"

Celestino's voice trailed off, as he remembered the murder of his father.

THE huge bulk of the butte stretched to either side of them, slanting steep slopes up to the sheer wall of the cliff above. The Rio Kid sat motionless in his saddle, intently listening. But no sound came to betray the outlaw gang if they were near, and a haphazard search might mean the wasting of precious hours. And yet there was nothing else they could do, for the outlaws might already have found the golden eagle.

"We'll have to take a chance," the Rio Kid decided grimly. "We'll try the south."

They angled their mounts along the base of the butte, but before they had traveled a quarter mile Pryor reined in. The faint roll of a man's shout had floated to his ears. He glanced toward Mireles.

"Eet came from the north, General."

Pryor nodded. "That's how I heard it," he clipped.

They reversed their direction, kicked up the pace of their mounts to a lope. Here on the low lands the haze was thickening into darkness, making black monsters out of the boulders and scrubby trees. But up above there was still light, a pink flush retreating slowly up the wall of the cliff as the sun dropped deeper behind the horizon.

The shout came again, nearer this time, and Pryor made out Lash Murratt's hard-edged voice.

"This way—this way, Wordeen!"

The voice came from above and far ahead.

"They're up-slope near the base of the cliff," the Rio Kid snapped. "We'd better swing up here."

They put their mounts to the slope, kicking through tangles of cactus that clawed spiny barbs at their legs. The slope steepened rapidly, and they were hindered by huge boulders that had weathered away from the wall above. Pryor could feel Saber's muscles strain as the dun lunged up the pitch, with Celestino's wiry mount following close behind.

Then, a quarter mile to the north, Pryor's shifting glance caught a golden splinter of reflected light high against the sky. The golden eagle, rising from the wall in startled circles.

"He's spooked!" came Lash Murratt's harsh yell. "Drop him, Wordeen!"

A rifle cracked, and the gilded eagle wheeled sharply away from the lead that whipped past him. Murratt's oath roared out.

"Cuss it, Wordeen!"

The rifle smashed again, a second, a third time. The eagle seemed to jump in mid-flight, then hang suspended in empty air. The echoes of the shots banged back and forth through the silence until it seemed the air itself was shuddering.

"Yuh got it!" Lash Murratt yelled jubilantly from the distance.

The eagle's wings fluttered feebly, and there was something pitiful in the shallow movement of those one-time powerful wings. The bird screamed, shrill and short, a poignant, dying sound. It started down like a lump of golden sunshine.

BUT its wings were still half-stretched. They caught the uprush of air, and the bird's fall skidded off toward the butte wall. Pryor found himself cursing as his eyes followed the final plunge of the great eagle. It hit the wall, and seemed to cling there a long moment. Then it was falling again, like a golden shadow sliding down the rust-red cliff. It disappeared.

"Eet fell on a ledge up there, General," Celestino Mireles said softly.

The Rio Kid realized abruptly that Saber was no longer moving, that the butte's wall was close ahead. He studied the cliff, marking the lesser pitch to the south, the ledges and crevices, the narrow chimney far above that would give a climber an avenue to the top. Slipping from the saddle, he pulled Saber into a cluster of boulders.

"Get yore rope, Celestino," he said quietly. "If we're goin' to get that bird, we've got to go up this wall tonight!"

The night was above Bob Pryor and behind him and below him as he started climbing up the butte's black wall. It was oddly like fighting his way out of a bad dream, a nightmare. Before long he could not see to pick out hand holds and foot holds in the darkness.

Below him Mireles was a vague shadow against the cliff. He heard the Mexican's nervous attempt at humor.

"Right now, General, I would gladly trade my guns for a pair of wings."

The Rio Kid's grin was thin and bleak. "Wings wouldn't do much good on a night like this," he said grimly. "A moon would help."

But there was no moon, and the light from the glittering stars above was too feeble to do any good.

The Rio Kid felt the sole of his left boot slip precariously, and he shifted his weight to his right foot warily. He wondered what falling would be like. He had heard a man lost consciousness quickly after dropping from a cliff, but he must not think of

WILLIAM (BILLY) BREAKENRIDGE

BORN on December 25, 1846, Billy Breakenridge left his home in Watertown, Wisconsin, before he was out of his 'teens and started carving his career in the West. His reputation as a mule-driver, surveyor, and Indian fighter grew rapidly, and after working his way into Arizona, he became a deputy sheriff in Phoenix in 1878.

Stocky and powerfully built, he followed the rush to Tombstone when Ed Schieffelin's strike became known, and shortly became a deputy under Sheriff Johnny Behan. A sample of his courage and keen sense of humor was shown in the way he handled his job of collecting taxes in the county. Having collected a considerable sum of money from ranchers in Sulphur Springs Valley, he moved on to the gunman-infested town of Galeyville, where he looked up — of all people — the gun boss of the town, "Curly Bill" Brocius, to act as his guard.

Whether influenced by Billy's show of cool nerve, or by the irony of the situation, it is not known, but Curly Bill rode guard for Breakenridge, helping collect taxes to pay the law officers he was fighting against!

Billy Breakenridge died after an operation on January 31, 1932.

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that. It would be fatal not to concentrate fully on the problem confronting him.

He balanced his weight carefully, then released his left hand to grope above. The wall was sheer and unbroken. He tightened his lips.

"'Fraid we're stalled," he said grimly. "Nothin' on either side up above."

Celestino's cool voice floated up to him. "Mebbe we can move to one side and find a break."

But there was nothing to the left. Pryor explored the wall to the right of him, found a narrow ledge just within reach. He shifted his weight to his right hand, then eased his right foot out, groping. His boot sole lodged on something solid.

"This may be it," he said. "But it's goin' to be tight goin'. How are yuh holdin' out?"

"My arms, they are very tired, General."

But Celestino's voice was cool and unafraid. So quiet that the Rio Kid's glance dropped involuntarily along the cliff toward the young Mexican.

CELESTINO'S face was a pale blur against the darkness, and there was a strain in the low sound of his breathing. Beyond and below, far below young Mireles, the Rio Kid could see the red flare of the out-

law's campfire. Lash Murratt and his men were taking it easy down there, but with the coming of dawn they would be climbing the cliff. And Pryor knew he had to reach the dead eagle and escape before the outlaws appeared.

"Yuh can work up to where I was, Celestino," Pryor said quietly. "After we get over this hump, the going will be easier."

Mireles didn't answer, but his raspy in-and-out breathing told Pryor he was inching his way up.

There was no lodging for Pryor's left boot. He balanced himself warily on his right, hugging the wall with his body. He groped overhead with his left, located a shallow ledge, and felt a glow of infinite relief.

They fought their way up like that, an inch at a time, testing each hand and foot hold with caution. Once Pryor's foot skidded treacherously on an age-rotted rock, and the blood congealed in his veins while he strained for his balance.

Then he was groping his way up again, the muscles of his arms and legs feeling like lead. Time was the measurement of one hand hold to another, the shallow in-draw of his lungs when it seemed that even to breathe would plunge him off backward into space.

His eyes ached from searching the black wall above him, then gradually he made out the slot of the rock-walled chimney overhead that shafted to the top of the butte. He didn't know how long it took them to reach the chimney, but they rested for minutes after they struggled into that narrow slot, with their backs flat against one wall, and their feet braced against the other.

When life began to filter back into his leaden muscles, Pryor dropped a glance to the young Mexican below him.

"Whenever you are ready, General," Celestino breathed.

Pryor grinned. "Like walkin' up a wall," he drawled.

His back braced against the wall of the chimney, the Rio Kid worked his way up, and when he finally cleared the top he dropped on his stomach to offer Mireles a hand.

Celestino writhed across the rim and sank to the ground wearily, breathing in heavy gasps.

"I'm theenk," he panted, "I would sleep even eef a rattlesnake was under me."

CHAPTER V

Marooned on High

PRYOR and his Mexican companion were awake before dawn, and when the first streaks of light were flushing the eastern horizon, Bob Pryor was knotting his rope around a gnarled tree on the edge of the cliff. He tested the knot carefully, then released the coil of hemp and watched it snake down through space.

Flat on his stomach, he studied the wall of the butte narrowly. From previous examination, he knew the dead eagle lay on a ledge a hundred feet below him, but he could not see it from where he lay. A few feet below, the wall bulged out, then sloped in again to the ledge on which the bird had fallen.

"I'll have to slide down the rope, then swing in to the ledge," he decided. "The ledge pinches out on both sides, and this is the only way down to that bird."

His glance traveled on down the wall. Far below the gray-blue haze was thinning out as the light of the day increased, and he searched the cliff for Lash Murratt's outlaws. He couldn't see them, but he knew they would be climbing the cliff somewhere by now.

"I'd better hustle," he said. "No sense in both of us goin' down, Celestino. You stay up here till I get back."

The young Mexican shook his head determinedly. "No, General. Eef you needed help down there, I could not give eet eef I am up here."

Pryor shrugged, knowing no argument could shake Celestino.

"Then wait till I give the word," he said quietly.

He gripped the rope, and swung out

into space. For a while he could brace his weight against the hemp and walk down the wall, but when the bulge pinched in he was left hanging in emptiness.

He went down the rope hand under hand, passing the knot where he had joined his length of rope to the lariat belonging to Mireles. The rope began spinning him around, but he halted that with a jerk of his legs.

He could see the dead eagle now, a dozen feet below him, but the cliff wall was farther away than he had figured. He eased himself down the rope until he was even with the ledge, then began kicking his legs to start his weight swinging. He was like a human pendulum curving back and forth. At each in-swing he groped his boots for the ledge—and missed.

Celestino's anxious voice came floating down to him.

"General, can you make it?"

Pryor didn't answer. His breath was rasping in and out. Each swing of his body arced him farther out over space, but it didn't seem to throw him any closer to the ledge. The ledge seemed to fade away from him. The muscles in his arms began knotting, and sweat began greasing the palms of his hands.

He tightened his grip, desperately kicking his swing wider. At last his boots touched the ledge, and he shoved away with his toes. He curved back, and his boots scraped across the surface of the ledge.

"General, are you all right?"

PRYOR kicked away the ledge, and for a fleeting instant he saw young Mireles' face on the cliff rim overhead. Then he was rocking back to the wall again, and this time he settled his weight down on the ledge beside the dead eagle.

"I'm coming down!" Celestino's voice dropped to him.

Pryor tightened his grip on the rope, and watched Mireles slide over the bulge of rock above. He braced himself and held the rope in until the young Mexican eased down to the ledge beside him.

"Hang onto the rope, Celestino," Pryor said. "If that ever gets away from us, we'll never get off this cliff alive."

He turned and bent over the dead eagle. Hank Wordeen's slug had torn through the bird's breast, and blood was a dry brown stain against the golden paint.

The paper was tied around the eagle's left leg. Pryor unknotted the cord and carefully unrolled the age-yellowed paper. It was a scrap from an old newspaper, the faded print announcing a new gold strike in the Nevada hills.

He turned the paper over, his eyes narrowing as they ran over the ink-lettered message. There was a pathetic hope in its briefness, footed by a crude map outlining the route of the missing wagon train and locating the canyon in which it was trapped.

The message read:

If this note is found, please send help at once. We are survivors of John Cudahay's wagon train, out of Virginia City, January, 1862. Bring four hundred feet of rope, and follow map below.

Sarah Cudahay.

The Rio Kid looked up.

[*Turn page*]

"It's just the way we figgered, Celestino," he said quietly. "The Cudahay outfit was trapped in some canyon north of here, and them two painted eagles was their only way of gettin' word outside."

A glint came into Celestino's eyes, and his fine mouth tightened.

"And if Lash Murratt's keelers find out where they are—" He never finished. The rope jerked in his hands, and Lash Murratt's harsh voice came down the face of the cliff.

"So yuh got away from them ants after all! Speak up, Rio Kid! Don't be backward! Nobody else could be down there."

A chill light flickered in the Rio Kid's blue eyes. He saw gray streak Celestino's face, as the young Mexican leaned back on the rope against the pulling of the outlaws above.

"General, eef they pull the rope up—"

Pryor added his weight to young Mireles', felt the tension on the rope go slack as he heard Murratt's derisive sneer.

"Don't let that give yuh any ideas! There's enough of us up here to pull yuh up with the rope if we want to. Only yuh ain't comin' up, Kid! We'll pull up the rope and leave yuh roostin' down there if yuh don't see this our way."

THE Rio Kid's lips were thin and hard, as swift thoughts sped through his mind. He and Celestino were trapped! And their only chance of escape lay in bargaining with the outlaws.

"Yuh're holdin' the high cards, Murratt!" he yelled up the cliff. "Name yore price."

Jubilation was in the outlaw leader's shout.

"The eagle, Rio Kid! Just tie it onto the end of the rope, and we'll let yuh off easy."

Contempt came to the Rio Kid's voice as he gave a mirthless laugh.

"Yuh think I'm that kind of a fool, Murratt? Yuh'd pull the bird up, then leave me stranded down here. Come again!"

Pryor's words whipped the outlaw's temper to white-heat. The rope was jerked with such violence that Celestino was almost pulled off into space. More hands than Murratt's alone were dragging on the other end of the rope as Pryor and Mireles quickly knew as they strained desperately against the pulling, but they were losing their tug of war with death. The Rio Kid shot a swift glance along either side of the rocky shelf. There was an inch-wide crevice a few feet away along the rim, butted with a round knob of rock.

"Over there, Celestino!" Pryor grunted.

They worked their way along the ledge, the pulling of the outlaws above increasing rapidly. With the strain pinching his lips thin and hard, Pryor bent, slipped the rope into the narrow crevice and hitched the end around the knob of rock. He leaned back, grinning.

"Murratt," he yelled mockingly, "yuh'd better figger out another deal. I'm keepin' this end of the rope down here."

The rope whipped back and forth under the tugging of the outlaws, then suddenly went loose. There was a moment of silence, then Murratt's voice came again.

"You win, Pryor! Only don't think yuh're holdin' all the cards. We got plenty grub and water, and we can starve yuh out if we have to. Throw that bird off the ledge so's we can see it fall, and yuh got my word nobody'll be left up here to keep yuh from climbin' out."

Celestino's face was drawn with strain.

"General, you do not believe him, do you?" he asked tightly.

Pryor's grin was thin and taut. "We've got nothin' to lose," he said. "I've got the note, and there's a chance playin' it his way."

The Rio Kid lifted his voice. "I'm throwin' the eagle off, Murratt!" he called, and nodded at the young Mexican.

Celestino picked up the dead bird, sent it out through space in a gold-glittering arc.

Almost instantly the upper end of the rope was cut and came snaking down the cliff.

"Yuh wanted that rope so bad, yuh can keep it," the outlaw boss jeered.

"We'll see yuh in Boot Hill, Rio Kid!"

There was no sound from above after that, and the Rio Kid sat down slowly, looking at the rope and watching the play of grim thoughts showing in young Mireles' face.

FOR a moment the Rio Kid felt utter defeat, as his glance traveled along the cliff ledge. It was a yard wide where he and Celestino sat, but a few feet on either side it began narrowing abruptly until finally it pinched out altogether on the sheer face of the wall.

The cliff swooping down from the shelf offered no hope. Scanning that precipice, he could see another ledge far below, but it was yards beyond the end of the rope that whipped about loosely in the breeze.

The sun was up, and heat was closing in inexorably. Thirst would come, he was thinking, and it would be worse than hunger.

Absently, his gaze shifted through the gulf of space. Three hundred feet below, the cliff sheered off on the talus shoulders of the butte. The altitude flattened out the desert that stretched away and around, and the far distance was studded with other buttes and mesas and mountain bulks, shimmering like islands through the liquid heat waves.

"Eet ees too bad for the Cudahay outfit," Celestino said softly. "When Murratt finds we still have the note that was on the bird, he will come up here and get eet after we are dead."

Young Mireles' statement brought the Rio Kid's thoughts into another channel.

"I reckon that's one thing he won't get," he said grimly.

He pulled the dangling rope up into a coil, and dropped it on the ledge. Opening the paper, he filed the details of the note in his mind, then struck a match and watched the message curl and blacken as the fire ate through it.

"We may not be able to save that lost outfit, but we've kept Murratt's killers from findin' 'em," he said flatly.

Restlessness stirred through him, and he shoved to his feet. Followed by Celestino's stare, he moved along the right hand stretch of the ledge, but there was nothing in that direction to offer escape. He turned back, his lips hard.

Celestino followed him as he moved along the left stretch of the rock shelf, his narrow glance shifting along the blunt face of the cliff.

"Eef we could grow wings, thees would be easy, General," the Mexican said, with wry humor.

"Mebbe we'll sprout some," the Rio Kid said. "Wings of hemp!"

CHAPTER VI

Wings of Hemp

FORTY feet overhead and beyond the pinch-out of the ledge on which the Rio Kid and Celestino stood was a sharp jutting of rock. Directly opposite them, the shelf opened out from the wall again, leading to the ragged stretch where they had climbed up the cliff during the night.

"If we could rope that rock up there and swing over to that ledge, we could work our way down," the Kid said hopefully. "Bring up the rope, Celestino."

He took the rope from the young Mexican, and carefully knotted a running noose. The ledge was a scant eighteen inches wide here, and pinching in rapidly. He gauged the distance to the overhead jutting of rock narrowly, then shook his head.

"I'll have to work a little closer. See if yuh can brace me while I make the throw, Celestino."

The shelf pinched down to a foot, as he worked along it, his lean body flat to the cliff. It took every effort of will to keep his eyes from the yawning gulf behind and below him. It seemed that gravity had turned into a huge magnet trying to draw him down through space.

He balanced himself, braced by Celestino's hand against his back. Flipping the rope noose open, he set himself, then made the throw. He almost lost his balance, and heard

Celestino's breath drawn in harshly.

"Be careful, General!"

The noose fell a yard short. Hard-lipped, Bob Pryor recoiled the rope. He balanced the noose, every nerve in his body like thin-drawn wires. Then he sent the noose snaking upward again with a violent jerk of his arm. Relief surged through him as he saw the loop drop over the jutting of rock.

He pulled the noose tight, but his balance on the narrow shelf was too precarious to test the rope. He glanced around, to see Celestino's face taut and paper-white.

"General, let me go first! You do not know the rope will hold!"

The Rio Kid grinned. "I know I'll die just as dead if I don't try it," he said softly. "This is my idea, so I'm tryin' out this set of rope wings first."

He gripped the rope, and measured the distance to the ledge beyond. If the rope held, there would be plenty of leeway in his wing to land on that shelf. If the rope did not hold. . . . He forced that thought from his mind.

He shoved off and saw space swooping under him. Hot wind fanned his face as his swing picked up speed. He felt the rope slip on the jutting of rock overhead, and knew an awful moment of terror. But the noose held.

The cliff wall streaked past, dragging the far ledge closer. His swing was beginning to slow up when he kicked his feet to the ledge and caught it. He started to fall off backward, and arched his back violently against the drag of gravity. When he caught his balance, he discovered for the first time that his lungs ached from lack of breath.

HE SENT the rope to his companion, weighted with a rock. Celestino swung across with a tight grin frozen on his fine-cut lips, and when he settled down on the shelf beside Pryor it was with a grunt of relief.

"If I ever get down to terra firma again I'll never get more than one foot off at a time, General," the Mexican breathed.

The Rio Kid grinned crookedly.

"That goes double," he drawled. "And the more firmer the less terror!"

The shelf led to a weathered stretch and they picked their way down the wall as rapidly as possible. Not until they reached the foot of the cliff did the tenseness of Pryor's muscles relax, and even then the threat of danger didn't leave his mind. He paused, straining to pick up some sound from the outlaw pack, but heard nothing.

"We'll slip away from 'em if we can," he said quietly. "The thing to think about now is that Cudahay outfit."

They moved guardedly along the foot of the wall toward the cluster of boulders where they had left their horses. It was while they were threading their way into the rocks that a voice suddenly rasped:

"Far enough, you two! Grab yore hats and don't let go unless yuh want a chunk of lead for breakfast!"

Bob Pryor spun around. His hands slashed down for his guns, but he never drew them. He caught a glimpse of a slouching figure in buckskin close in to one of the boulders, and that same instant heard the oath that broke from the man's hard mouth.

"Rio Kid!"

The tenseness dropped away from Bob Pryor, and a quick grin split his lips.

"Ed Schieffelin!" he drawled. "Put down that gun, Ed. Or do yuh hold a Sharps on a man while yuh shake his hand?"

Ed Schieffelin was a powerfully built man, but packing not an ounce of surplus weight. His boots were heavy and thorn-scarred, and the soiled buckskin shirt and pants he wore were those of a man who had long followed the prospector's endless trails.

He made a striking picture, standing there in the early morning light. He wore a belt gun, and there was grim competence in the hang of the heavy-bore Sharps cradled under his left arm. His features were ruggedly handsome, burned leather-brown by the desert suns and winds. His were the clear and steady eyes of a man long accustomed to looking into the far distances, cool and ever alert with the knowledge that danger could lurk in the most unexpected places.

"Heard shootin' up here last night, and figgered I'd drift up for a look-

BRONCHO CHARLIE MILLER

"RIDE like hell, son!"

Those words started "Broncho Charlie" Miller on his first ride for the Pony Express. He was only a stripling, just turned eleven, but he was Frontier-cut, and no stranger to a horse. He won his job with the Pony Express by substituting for the regular rider who had been killed.

Born at Hat Creek, Modoc County, California, on January 1, 1850, Broncho Charlie spent much of his childhood playing with friendly Modoc Indians. At the age of eight he rode his first bronc on a neighboring ranch, and was immediately named "Broncho Carlos" by the *vaqueros,* a name that followed him the rest of his life.

Typically a man of the Frontier in dress and habits, he had his share of adventure. He punched cattle, shucked his guns as fast as the next fellow when forced to, but it was in bronc busting that he earned his reputation, both on the range and while traveling with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.

When he was sixty-seven he lied himself into the British Army for service in the first World War. He distinguished his eighty-first year by busting his last bronc, and later carrying his old Pony Express mail pouch on horseback from New York to San Francisco.

see," he explained in his lazy drawl. "Run onto these hosses here, and reckoned I'd hang around to find out what I could."

The Rio Kid grinned widely. "Half an hour ago it'd have been a good bet a couple of bodies would land about here," he said.

A frown furrowed the prospector's brow.

"Yeah?" he grunted. "Who?"

PRYOR pointed to himself and young Mireles.

"Lash Murratt had us trapped on a ledge up there," he said, pointing up the cliff. "We used up a lifetime of luck gettin' down."

Schieffelin's oath was low and fervent.

"I figgered that pack of polecats would be mixed up in this when I heard the shootin'," he growled. "I cut their sign two days ago over around Horn Mesa. You after that bunch?"

Pryor shrugged. "I ain't shore whether we're after them, or they're after us," he said with a chuckle. "It's all wrapped up in the same sack, so to

speak. It has to do with the lost Cudahay wagon train."

He went on, briefly telling the details he had learned about the lost freighter outfit. When he had finished, there was a cold glint in the prospector's stare.

"That bunch of sidewinders under Murratt would kill their mothers to get half the gold Cudahay was packin'," he grated. "If yuh can use another hand on this job, I'd be proud to throw in with yuh, Kid."

Pryor was grateful. "I don't know who can be more help," he said thanking Schieffelin. "You know this part of the country, and I don't. Mebbe yuh can figger this map out."

He squatted on his heels, and from memory drew in the dust the map he had seen on the note he had taken from the dead eagle. Ed Schieffelin dropped his head in an understanding nod.

"It's over past the Graveyard Peaks," he said. "All I know about that section is what I seen once from the top of a mesa. It looked plenty bad to me—desert as far as I could see, cut up so bad a snake would get tangled up tryin' to get through. No sign of water that I could make out. Nobody I ever heard of knows what it's like inside."

"Yuh figger yuh could find the hidden canyon from the map?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Whoever drew that map wasn't either blind or a fool," the prospector grunted. "His directions are clear, and he's got his landmarks tagged plain enough for anybody to make out. But what Cudahay was drivin' through there for is more than I can figger out."

"You forget," Celestino Mireles said quietly, "that the wagons were carrying gold for the Confederate Army, and Cudahay was trying to escape capture by the Union troops."

"Well, Cudahay shore picked a route that wasn't none overcrowded," Ed Schieffelin said dryly.

Pryor carefully obliterated the map he had drawn in the dust, then straightened, his jaw muscles bunching purposefully.

"What we'd better do right now is get off this butte before we have another run-in with Lash Murratt's crowd," he said quietly. "We'll settle with them after we've done what we can for Cudahay's outfit."

Ed Schieffelin disappeared, and returned leading a shaggy grulla. They mounted, and made use of all possible cover as they worked down the steep slope.

TROUBLED thoughts were in the Rio Kid's mind as he rode Saber toward the desert flats. One thing was certain—the job before him was too big and too important for only three men to handle. Too many lives hung in the balance.

For if he failed to rescue the lost Cudahay party, he knew they would never live to get out of the canyon in which they had been trapped. Lash Murratt would see to that. That was the way Murratt worked—killing for what it would gain him. And Murratt would recruit every gun-slinger in the country in order to get the lost wagon train gold.

The last pitch of the butte flattened out, and they swung to the south, riding in tight-lipped silence. A draw opened up a mile from the butte, and they swung their mounts into it, with the sweltering heat crowding against them.

Ed Schieffelin hipped around in his saddle, a faint frown on his weathered forehead.

"Looks like mebbe we lost Murratt's crowd, but that ain't nothin' to bet on," he growled. "What's yore plan, Kid?"

"To go after rope, first off," Bob Pryor said crisply. "That will be my job."

Concern flooded Celestino Mireles' face.

"But, General, I cannot let you go alone!"

"If I ride alone," Pryor said quietly, "I'll have a better chance gettin' away without Murratt seein' me. Besides, yuh'll have plenty to do here. The first thing I want yuh to do is hole up at a place where I can meet yuh. I ought to get back inside a week."

"My camp is the best place for that," Ed Schieffelin spoke up. "It's in the middle of a brasada thicket at the foot of a hogback ten miles due

east of here. Yuh can't miss it."

The Rio Kid nodded. "Good!" he said decisively. "Yore job is to do all yuh can to keep track of Murratt's gang. If we know where they are, we'll have a better chance losin' them when we head for the lost canyon."

"Eet will be as you say," Celestino said with resignation.

"Best keep in this arroyo as long as yuh can," Ed Schieffelin advised. "Lash Murratt's got an Injun beat holler when it comes to usin' his eyes."

Pryor lifted his hand in salute, and moved Saber past the two men. He didn't try for speed the first few miles, warily guarding against hoof dust that would mark his trail for any watching eye.

CHAPTER VII

Cross Plotting

HIGH up on the shoulder of the butte, Lash Murratt was watching with bleak intentness. There was derision in the thin twist of his hard mouth, smoldering evil glinting in his narrowed eyes.

"Pryor thinks he's outguessed us," he sneered. "Well, let him think it!" He cursed. "He's used all his luck up, and the next time we tangle I'll have that jasper's hide."

Beside him, Dutch Kohler spoke up in his guttural growl.

"*Ja!* But if you let him go after help now, dot vill not be so good!"

Lash Murratt laughed harshly. "Yuh think I'm that big a fool?" he bit out. He swung around in his saddle to stab a finger at Bruno Galt. "Galt, collect the rest of the outfit, and foller Ed Schieffelin and that young Mex. It's a cinch they both know where Cudahay is, and I want 'em alive, savvy! They'll talk if I have to use every Injun trick I ever heard of to loosen their tongues!"

Bruna Galt grinned evilly.

"And what about Pryor," he grated.

Hatred rolled into the outlaw leader's face in a dark tide.

"The rest of us will take care of that gobbler," he snarled. "He's headin' for Prescott, and we'll have a little reception party ready for him when he starts across the Colorado River."

Believing that he had escaped the eagle eyes of the outlaws, the Rio Kid rode on, hour after hour, as the heat beat down in blistering waves. As the long hard day passed, and night was drawing on, weariness was in every muscle. His face was hot and dry, and the flanks of the big dun beneath him were powdered with dust, streaked with sweat-froth.

"We'll bed down as soon as we cross the Colorado," Pryor muttered to Saber.

But although the strain was beginning to tell he did not relax in his vigilance. Wariness had become as automatic as breathing, a sixth sense that had been of value to him on uncounted danger trails.

He rode erect in his saddle, his lean body rocking slightly with the rhythmic jog of Saber's mile-eating trot. His eyes were keen and restless, keeping tab on every rock and bit of brush that might offer cover for some killer.

This land of canyons and domes and escarpments had been the home of Brigham Young's Latter-Day Saints, organized by the leader of the Mormons as the State of Deseret. Without subscribing to their religious beliefs, Bob Pryor had a profound respect and admiration for what the Mormons had done in this country. They had brought civilization to a naked desert.

He had seen their Temple at Salt Lake City, their irrigation system that watered thriving crops on ground that had known only the roots of cactus and sage. He had seen the great herds of cattle and blocks of sheep that helped make the followers of Joseph Smith self-supporting.

BUT although Brigham Young had done miracles, there were miles in the territory that had been unexplored even by the roving tribes of Navajos. But Pryor was sure that some day, generations later, this land would be the nation's last frontier.

Another hour brought Pryor to a flock of grazing sheep, and he knew

he was nearing a Mormon settlement on the Colorado River. He nodded to the sheepherder, a tall, sun-darkened youth in rough homespuns, and moved on without pausing.

Ahead, he could hear the ceaseless churning of the river, a low sound that was like a distant wind rolling through pine-tops.

He swung Saber onto a narrow trail, and shortly rode toward a small group of rough buildings. The settlement was no different than any of a hundred others he had seen. Dogs barked as he rode in, children peered from shadowed doorways, men who were neither friendly nor hostile watched him with frank curiosity.

Pryor reined in near a man slouching beneath the board awning of the store.

"Howdy, friend," he said genially. "Any chance hirin' the ferry across the river this late?"

The man nodded. "Might be. Brother Zachary is down at the river. You'll have to see him."

Pryor thanked the man, moved on. The settlement was perched on a high bluff overlooking the river. The road switch-backed precariously down the steep bluff, and at the river bank Pryor pulled in at the ferry. A man came out of a nearby shack to eye him without speaking. Pryor grinned at him.

"Yuh're the ferry owner, I reckon. I figgered I might be able to hire yuh to take me across."

"I was just gettin' ready tuh call it a day," the Mormon grunted.

"I'm in kind of a hurry," Pryor said quietly. "Would ten dollars make it worth yore while?"

The man hesitated, then nodded.

"Ride aboard," he said.

The ferry was made of heavy planking to withstand the pounding of the river, held against the drag of the current by a thick rope extending between the two banks.

Pryor paid the man, and the ferry shifted into movement. Standing beside Saber, the Rio Kid watched the muddy waters. A few miles downstream, the river burrowed into the first of the canyons, seething and churning until it reached the water-gouged depths of the Grand Canyon.

They were nearing mid-stream when Pryor felt the faint shiver that ran down the black line along Saber's back. A chill whipped up Pryor's own back, and he shot a quick glance to both banks of the river.

He could see no sign of danger. And yet he knew danger was here! That shiver along Saber's black stripe was a never-failing warning. Many times during the War and the bloody months that followed, that muscle-quivering had warned the Rio Kid of hidden death. For Saber seemed gifted with an uncanny ability to smell out danger before it struck.

THE black stripe rippled again under Pryor's hand and Saber's head turned to nip at his arm. The Rio Kid gave the Mormon a sharp glance.

"Yuh carry anybody else over a short while ago?" he asked quietly.

The man's eyes narrowed. "You a Mormon?" he asked bluntly.

Pryor shook his head. The Mormon scowled, throwing a glance around the ferry planks.

"Then yuh must have the power of the Prophets when it comes to havin' visions," he growled. "I swept the ferry clean a few minutes ago, and there ain't no sign left to read. Yeah, I took some gents across. About an hour ago." He stared at Pryor narrowly.

There was a sharp edge behind the Rio Kid's cold voice. "Seven or eight of them," he bit out. "Hard-lookin' customers. Been ridin' hard. That right?"

The man nodded shortly.

"Yeah, but if there's goin' to be trouble—"

The bullet made a snarling sound close to the Rio Kid's ear, and the late afternoon silence was split by the crack of a rifle from the south bank. Pryor leaped to one side, a yell of warning ripping from his throat.

"Get down! This ain't yore fight!"

A dark puff of smoke was hanging over a rock on the south bank of the river. Even as the Rio Kid saw it, he heard Lash Murratt's jeering shout.

"Sort of caught, ain't yuh, Rio Kid? Plumb in the middle of the crick without a paddle."

Pryor whipped out his Colt, but the distance was too great for short-gun shooting. He was trapped! He crouched, his lips hard, his thoughts searching for some way out. But there was none. The killer pack could cut him to pieces before the slow-moving ferry could return to the far river bank. More than that, he knew the Mormon was marked for death because he would know too much about the outlaws.

It was that knowledge that was most galling to the Rio Kid. The rifle smashed again, and a slug nipped at the brim of his hat. It turned his thoughts harder, for he knew they could have killed him with either slug, but they hadn't. They were giving him time to think about what was coming.

Fury swept through the Rio Kid as he heard Murratt's murderous taunt.

"Next one comes closer, Kid!"

The rifle cracked, and there was a hot snap in the wind that hit his face. He could see the killer gang now, standing in full view in the rocks. He jerked up his gun, tilting the long muzzle against the too-great distance, hurled three quick shots at the outlaws. He saw dust kick up around them, heard their startled yells as they dived for cover.

Pryor whipped around, throwing himself into Saber's saddle.

"Let's go, boy!" he said sharply. "We'll make 'em work to get us anyhow!"

SABER'S big muscles bunched, and with a sudden lurch he hurtled into the air, clearing the ferry's guard rail. The Mormon's wild shout hit him as Saber plowed into the churning current.

"Come back, yuh fool! Yuh ain't got a chance in that water!"

Then Lash Murratt's savage yelp came from the river bank.

"He's tryin' to swim it! Sink that jasper, yuh gun-slammers!"

The current of the river was like a monster slashing at both man and horse. It dragged them under after Saber hit the water, then the dun forged to the surface snorting and blowing.

Pryor could hear the vicious roaring of outlaw guns over the growling of the river, each slug kicking spouts of water around him and the dun. They were spun around in a whirlpool, but Saber's powerful lunges kicked them out of that. The current caught them in a savage grip, whipping them downstream at an unbelievable speed.

A jutting shoulder of rock on the bank came between Pryor and the outlaws, and in his last glimpse he saw them scrambling for their horses.

"They'll be waitin' for us in the next open place down-river," Pryor muttered. "We've got to get out here, boy!"

Saber's swimming was magnificent, but he seemed to be making no progress. Pryor slipped from the saddle to make it easier for the dun, and felt the warm muddy waters rise to his chin. He gripped the horse's tail, kicking his feet high to avoid Saber's threshing hoofs. Downstream he could hear a growing roar where the river plunged into a rapids, and the sound seemed to throw desperation into the dun.

Another whirlpool clutched at them, but Saber kicked his way out of it, slogging through the water with all the power in his big body, blowing and snorting savagely.

They traveled ten yards downstream for every one cross-current. They swept around a bend, and an eddy curled them in toward the bank. Then they hit a quiet stretch, and Saber splashed out on the rocky shore.

Without pausing even for breath, the Rio Kid swung into saddle. One sharp glance told him it would be futile to attempt climbing the bluff at this point. He quickly turned Saber upstream.

"Murratt will be waitin' down-river," he muttered. "But when we don't show up he won't be long pickin' up our trail."

Dusk was thickening when the Rio Kid swung up the narrow trail opposite the Mormon settlement. He topped the last rise of the bluff, paused, mulling over a plan.

Here the trail thinned out to twin wheel-ruts bending to the west toward the distant Mormon town of Kanab. Due south was open desert, Navajo

country. Although the Indians were normally friendly to whites, the desert itself was a formidable enough enemy to anyone who attempted to cross it during the burning midsummer heat.

But he had no choice. Even as he considered the two routes he saw Murratt's killer gang sweep around a shoulder of rock a quarter of a mile away. They saw him, and Dutch Kohler's throaty yell ripped out.

"There he is, Boss! We vill run down him this time for shore!"

A TIGHT grin twisted the Rio Kid's mouth, and the press of his knee sent his big dun forward in a hard run.

"Show 'em, Saber!" he shouted, urging on the horse.

He laughed as the dun's pounding strides lengthened. Saber stretched out in a wild burst of speed, the wind from his run making a flowing banner of his mane. The outlaws spurred their mounts cruelly, but they were hopelessly outdistanced, before they had traveled a mile.

Lash Murratt pulled up, feral savagery in the rasp of his oaths, but there was admiration in Hank Wordeen's thin voice.

"That danged hoss didn't run! He just jumped up in the air and flew!"

"Let him go!" the outlaw leader snarled. "He's headin' through Navajo country, and it's a cinch he'll come back that way. We'll throw a two-way game at him that he'll never get out of alive!"

He hipped around in his saddle, jabbed a stiff finger at one of the men in his gang.

"Jake, get to Prescott as fast as yuh can. And when yuh get there make shore yuh don't slip up on this job I'm givin' yuh."

He threw his orders at Jake Ringo, then motioned Jake off with a flip of his hand.

"The rest of yuh are ridin' with me," he rasped. "Tonight we're shootin' up one of old Kuchene's Navajo villages. We'll yell so he'll think we'll be back in a few days, and every Injun in the country will be waitin'. They'll get the Rio Kid—if he gets out of Ringo's trap alive!"

CHAPTER VIII

A Town's Menace

ON THE second day after his fight at the Mormon ferry Bob Pryor rode into Prescott. High in the mountains, the air was cool and tanged with the scent of pines. A few soldiers from the nearby Army post rubbed shoulders along the hoof-gutted street with miners and prospectors and freighters. Cattlemen were not many, but Pryor was certain their day was coming, for ranchers would not be long in discovering the lush grass and cool streams of that region.

Night had come early in the little mountain town. Pryor left Saber to the care of the livery tender, and started out for a brief examination of the town. Hardly ten days ago he had been heading for Prescott, but the murder of the rancher a few miles to the east had sent him and Celestino Mireles north into Lash Murratt's country after the killers.

The town was composed of scattered frame buildings, with yellow shafts of lamplight slanting under board awnings into the dusty street.

The sounds were familiar to Bob Pryor's ears. A freighter yelled and whipped his string of mules down a side street, the heavy wagons growling through the darkness like a chained beast. A horse nickered in the stables. Somewhere on the far fringe of the town a dog bayed at the rising moon. Boots thudded and scraped along the plank walks, and a man's strident laugh broke over the music of a tinny piano in a nearby saloon. A dance girl's laugh rose and fell.

The day's labors were over, and Prescott was swinging into the night's revelry. There probably would be trouble tonight, for there was always trouble among men who lived hard and played hard. But the town didn't seem bad—not like other range and mining settlements Pryor had

ED SCHIEFFELIN

WARNED by the famous scout, Al Sieber, that all he would find prospecting in the mountains south of Tucson, Arizona, was "his tombstone," Ed Schieffelin stubbornly continued his search for silver in spite of the ever-present danger of being killed by Geronimo's roving Apache bands.

Due to the unyielding courage of Ed Schieffelin, one of the most famous silver strikes of the Southwest was made. And, remembering Al Sieber's warning, Schieffelin named his strike the "Tombstone," a name which was given to the town which sprang up at the scene of the strike.

Ed Schieffelin made his fortune in his Tombstone strike, but riches failed to satisfy him and he still hungered for freedom. He was a true example of the axiom, "Once a prospector, always a prospector." He died near the end of the century on one of his lone prospecting trips, still following the lure of hidden ore.

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visited. Prescott was more like a New England town transplanted to the Frontier, with the staid qualities of farmers toning down the wildness of the natives.

Pryor turned in at the hotel, tired from three long days in the saddle. He moved up to the clerk's desk, and the man eyed him sleepily.

"Sign the book, and take Room Seven," the clerk said disinterestedly.

An amused half smile touched Pryor's lips. The clerk didn't bother to glance at the register after he had penciled:

Bob Pryor, from points south

He went up the stairs, located his room. It was furnished with a bed and a single chair that served also to hold the wash basin. He hooked the door behind him, and from habit looked to the one window. There was no way a prowler could reach it from the outside, nor was there any place across the black gulf of the alley where a killer could crouch for a murder shot.

The feeling of security loosened Pryor's nerves, and he undressed and dropped into bed. For a while he listened to the mingled noises of the night, and laid out his plans for the next day.

He speculated on what Lash Murratt's next move would be; then abruptly all his thoughts crystallized into one that brought a cold chill. Murratt and his gang had tried to kill him! Then they must know where Ed Schieffelin and Celestino Mireles

were! They wanted Pryor out of the way, and were counting on torturing Schieffelin and Celestino into revealing the location of the lost Cudahay outfit!

THE thought sent fear through Pryor's mind. But Ed Schieffelin and young Mireles were not fools, he told himself grimly. Even if they were captured, he knew no power on earth could make them talk.

And in the meantime, all Pryor could do was finish his work in Prescott and get to Schieffelin's camp as soon as possible. All he could do was hope—and wait.

Finally Bob Pryor went to sleep....

There was trouble in the air. Pryor could feel it as he buttoned his shirt the next morning, and pulled on his boots. It was like a dark cloud hovering over his brain, an intangible premonition that sent an odd tension through his lean frame.

The town seemed quiet—too quiet—and there was something in that early morning hush that he didn't like. He moved to the window, frowning slightly, trying to shove the presentiment out of his mind. There were men on the street, but none of the bustling activity of a Frontier town wakening to a new day. The men seemed wary of each other, queerly expectant, yet the Rio Kid could see no reason for that.

"Must've slept wrong side up last night," he growled.

He whistled a bar of "The Wall-eyed Brindle Bull", then let the tune slip out of his mind. He decided his nerve attack was from worry about Celestino and Ed Schieffelin, and let it go at that.

But that was not the reason. He knew that as soon as he reached the head of the stairs. A big man in a prospector's rough garb was halfway up the stairs, and when he saw Pryor he halted, stiffened, a shadow of fear on his weathered face.

The man backed hurriedly down the stairs.

"After you, friend!" he said hoarsely.

Pryor moved down the stairs, scowling slightly at the prospector's strange action.

"Thanks, hombre," he drawled.

The man nodded, and went up the stairs two at a time. The nameless premonition turned into something with more reality.

"That jasper acted like he was afraid I was goin' to gun him!" the Rio Kid thought.

Pryor's strides, habitually soft, took the desk clerk by surprise.

"Could yuh point me at a good place to eat?" he asked quietly.

The clerk swung around as if stung. Recognition brought a glint of terror into his eyes, and choked his voice. He pointed vaguely out the window, his bony finger shaking.

"Sh-shore, friend." His voice was choppy. "Right d-down the street. To the l-left. Lung Win d-dishes out the best food in t-t-town."

Pryor stared at the man narrowly. "Yuh feel all right, pardner?" he asked.

The clerk nodded, his mouth drawn. "Shore, f-friend. Never better. And I w-want to stay that way, f-friend."

ANGER stirred through the Rio Kid at the man's strange actions.

"Yuh don't have to bow an' scrape to me," he growled. "I ain't goin' to hurt yuh."

"N-no offense, f-friend," the clerk chattered.

Pryor stalked stiffly out of the hotel. He stepped out on the plank walk, and a freighter coming toward him, full two yards away, jumped to one side, apologizing hoarsely for being in Pryor's way.

But the man hadn't been in his way, and the Kid knew it. The freighter was scared, just as the prospector and clerk in the hotel had been scared.

Pryor strode on, scowling at the silence that had fallen over the street. The few men he saw faded quickly out of sight. And when he entered the restaurant and was served by the almond-eyed Chinese, the men who had been eating shoved away from their tables and left the room.

"They act like I'm poison," Pryor told himself sourly.

He didn't like it. The town had suddenly turned into something wicked and dangerous, like a cornered wolf that was scared and yet baring

his fangs to fight. It thinned out Pryor's nerves, but sharpened his senses.

The food seemed flat and tasteless, but he forced it down, knowing long hours would pass before he could eat again.

He left the restaurant, and angled across the street toward the general store, his eyes cold and restless. The street was beginning to fill up again, clotting here and there with knots of silent, staring men. Their hands were ominously close to their guns. They seemed to be waiting for him to make some move that they were expecting.

The town was all cocked and ready to explode. Pryor could feel violence crowding in on him from every side, a nameless danger that he couldn't explain or find any reason for. It began to wear on his temper.

He strode into the store, empty except for the gray-haired man behind the counter, and ordered rope.

"Four hundred feet," he said quietly.

The man was clumsy in his efforts to hurry. He dragged a heavy coil of rope across the counter, blanched as Pryor reached into his pocket for money.

"That's all right, friend," he croaked. "No charge."

His anger became too much for Bob Pryor then.

"I pay for what I get," he growled. He slapped the money down hard on the counter, freezing the store man with his stare. "What in blazes is wrong with this town?" he flared. "It's 'friend this' and 'friend that' every time I talk to a gent. Yuh'd think I was a sidewinder the way everyone shies away from me. What's goin' on here?"

The man tried to answer, but his voice lodged in his throat. He gulped, then his words came in a hoarse rush.

"Help yoreself to anything else yuh want, friend."

He went stumbling along the aisle behind the counter toward a back room.

PRYOR'S lips flattened as his anger grew and his temper flared. The town was crazy! He picked up the coil of rope and shoved angrily out of the store. But he halted in the middle of the plank walk—for he saw danger closing in on him. Swiftly he moved to one side to place the store wall at his back.

Townsmen and miners and prospectors were coming toward him from both ends of the street. Silent knots of men, gun-hung and hard-faced, determined in spite of their obvious fear.

"I didn't hear no shot," one of them was saying, "so Cal must be all right."

"Might have pole-axed him," another rasped.

The groups of men converged, and became a solid wall in front of Pryor. The ends of the crowd pinched in, and formed an ominous half circle, with Pryor in the middle.

The Rio Kid stared at them, striving to make out their thoughts. Death was in the mind of every man in that close-packed mob, hatred that cut against Pryor from all sides. But they were scared of him in spite of their numbers. They showed that in the way their hands fidgeted around their guns, wanting to draw, but afraid to.

One of them spoke then, a short, white-lipped man with a marshal's badge pinned on the front of his dusty vest.

"He's got rope," he muttered in a smothered tone. "We'll use that!"

CHAPTER IX

Lynch Mob

LYNCH talk! A mob of rope-hungry vigilantes! Pryor's temper broke then, and his voice blazed out at them furiously.

"What in thunder is eatin' you gents!" The thunder of his voice drove the leaders back against the men crowding behind them.

"Ever since I got up this mornin' I've had this town buffaloed without knowin' why!" Pryor ripped out. "All right, yuh want to lynch me! Now *I* want to know why!"

The marshal spoke up, and hatred was glaring from his eyes.

"You ought to know the answer to that. Matt Rogers ain't dead yet, but he's goin' to die. He talked plenty when we found him last night."

"Cuss it all, I asked why yuh're jumpin' *me!*" Pryor yelled.

It was the marshal's steady courage that kept the crowd from breaking up under the menace of the Rio Kid's temper. The lawman was as scared as the rest of them, but he had the nerve to stand his ground.

"Because yuh shot Matt Rogers last night!" he bit out savagely.

"Yuh're crazy!" Pryor rasped. "I never left my room last night. I never heard of Matt Rogers, and if yuh want to check up on me—"

He got no further. The fury of the mob whipped up and blotted out his voice with a sullen roar. From the back of the crowd, Pryor heard the hotel clerk's shrill yelp.

"His name is in the desk book! Even if he never shot old Matt, he's got a hang-rope comin'!"

"Lyin' won't do yuh no good, killer!" the lawman's growl gouged through the muttering of the mob. "Old Matt lived to talk, savvy? He told how yuh shot him, and robbed him, then sneered that yuh'd be in Room Seven at the hotel if he had any fuss to make. Yuh thought he'd die quick, but Matt is a tough old rooster. He lived to tell what happened, and—"

A man came running down the street, throwing his yell through the marshal's voice.

"Matt just died! But he was grinnin' after I told him we'd square this for him!"

A cold lump formed in the Rio Kid's stomach. He had been framed, thoroughly and viciously. Whoever had killed Matt Rogers had known the old man would live long enough to talk and pin the shooting on Pryor. Now the man was dead. He couldn't talk and clear the man the vigilantes had cornered.

And one glance at that mob told Pryor they wouldn't wait or listen to argument. They wanted his life, to pay for Rogers' murder. They would take his life in payment no matter what he tried to tell them.

"If yuh fools would listen a minute—" Pryor began, desperately.

"Matt was a harmless old man," the lawman broke in harshly. "He never hurt anybody, and he had a grin for everyone. I'm sworn to back the law, but danged if I need a star to see justice done here."

WITH sudden violence, he ripped the badge from his vest, and sent it spinning away in a glittering arc.

"Let's go, men!" he yelled. "He's got his own rope, and we'll use it! Come on!"

There was no time for guns, nor would the Rio Kid have used his weapons if he could. The men in the mob were honest in spite of what they were doing, and the guns of the Rio Kid were only for those outside the law.

The men lunged toward him in a solid body, yelling and cursing, and even as they moved Pryor saw a horseman in front of the hotel pause, laughing contemptuously, then swing his mount out of town.

Jake Ringo! So Ringo had been behind that murder, ordered by Lash Murratt to frame the Rio Kid! The knowledge sent a savage heat smashing through Pryor's brain.

The lawman came first, dragging at a holstered gun. Pryor lifted his leg, and the kick of his boot sent half a dozen of the vigilantes down in a tangle with the lawmen.

But others were crowding in, fighting each other in their mad attempts to reach the lone man braced against the store wall. A fist slugged at Pryor, and he knocked the miner who sent it, back with a short, wicked blow. He jerked up the rope, smashed the crowd back with the heavy coil.

He was a fighter on high heels, the Rio Kid. He moved with the savage speed and power of a longhorn steer, lips peeled back, lean muscles cocking and exploding as he smashed the heavy coil of rope around. There were forty in the crowd, and he held them off with the sheer violence of his attack.

A man dived for his legs, and Pryor knocked him aside with his knee. Fists slugged at him from all sides, chopping into his muscles. Hands snagged and ripped his shirt.

They battered him back until his shoulders were flat against the wall of the store, but still he wouldn't go down.

Oaths and fists and clawing hands. His lungs ached with each rasp of his breathing, and his arms were turning to lead. Blood was pounding at his temples like trip-hammers, but his senses were clear and sharp.

He played man against man, fading and dodging quickly so that they tangled with each other. And always he kept working his way toward the mouth of the alley beside the store.

But he wouldn't make it. He knew that with cold certainty. One man alone could not hold off forty, and get away. He tripped over a loose plank, and almost went down. A man lunged at him, and he knocked the fellow back with a savage butt of his head

CELESTINO MIRELES

against the stomach. He had a fleeting glimpse of that man's face turning a dirty white from agony, as he smashed his way closer to the alley.

Then abruptly he discovered another man beside him, a short, thick man who threw the crowd back with battering fists, all the time yelling in a hoarse bull voice.

"Let's go, Pryor! They want a fight! Let's give it to 'em!"

Billy Breakenridge! Recognition stabbed through the Rio Kid's brain. He saw Breakenridge make a hole through the end of the crowd, and jumped grimly after the man.

The hole plugged up, and Breakenridge smashed it open again. Pryor backed after him, fighting off the men who tried to close in behind them.

SUDDENLY he felt the end of the store wall that was sliding against his back, and knew he was at the mouth of the alley. Billy Breakenridge's shout beat against his ears.

"Run for it, Pryor!"

Pryor hammered the crowd back with a swing of the heavy rope coil, then spun and broke into a hard run down the alley. Breakenridge was close ahead of him, his powerful legs kicking up thick puffballs of dust.

Behind them the crowd was turning the air blue with savage yells.

"That killer is Lash Murratt! Plug him!"

A gun smashed, and Pryor saw the slug rip a long furrow out of the store wall at his side. Another roared and a man squalled harshly.

"Quit crowdin' my arm, cuss yuh!"

The store ended, and Pryor dived across the corner as the alley was filled with blaring guns. Breakenridge was heading toward the next building.

"No!" Pryor yelled. "This way!"

They plunged through the rear door of the store, doubling back on the lynch mob, and at the front door Pryor knocked the shotgun out of the hands of the store owner crouching beside the window.

"Try to use that, and I'll blow yore head off!" Pryor snarled.

He wanted to throw fear into the store owner, and he did. The man whitened and ducked behind the counter as Pryor whirled and ran out the front door after Breakenridge. The town was full of noises, men roaring like a wolf pack rushing a kill.

The Rio Kid and Breakenridge broke down the street, followed by the store owner's high-pitched shout.

"They're goin' this way! They cut through the store!"

Somewhere deep in the alley, a man bawled:

"That's Cal yellin'! They doubled on us."

Pryor's pounding strides brought

him alongside Billy Breakenridge, and he swung his arm toward the stables.

"I've got to get my hoss!" he shouted.

There was grim mirth in Breakenridge's panting answer.

"Yuh think I travel around this country on foot? We'll be lucky if we ever see a saddle again! Yuh can shore stir up the best ways to get a man killed!"

The mob was pounding down the street behind them when they dived into the livery.

"I'll hold that bunch of gobblers off while yuh saddle up!" Breakenridge yelled. "Mine's that hammerhead paint in the corral. Don't waste time choosin' saddles!"

Even as he ran forward, Pryor whistled a few sharp notes of "Said the Big Black Charger", and the tune brought Saber pounding eagerly across the corral toward him.

HE HEARD the full-throated blare of Billy Breakenridge's shots as he strapped the saddle on Saber. Billy was holding the mob back with slugs kicking up dust at their feet, but once the crowd scattered and took cover they would settle down to a deadly sniping.

The town marshal was ripping out orders through the racket.

"Carlos, take three men and see if yuh can slip around behind the livery! If yuh spot Murratt, don't stop to say howdy. That polecat is killer from inside-out! Elrich, you and Jackson get on top of the saddle shop, and see if yuh can drop that jasper behind the stable shed. Harvey, come back here! Yuh want to make yore wife a quick widow?"

A man was scooting up the street in a crouching zigzag run. Breakenridge threw a slug in front of him as Pryor ran up with the saddled paint, but the fellow didn't scare. He dived behind a water barrel, his gun jumping and roaring.

A slug jerked Breakenridge's hat around as he piled frantically into saddle.

"By the sins of Satan!" he yelled like a locoed Piute. "And I wasn't even asked into this ruckus!"

He and the Rio Kid swept out into the street, with slugs whining through the air all around them. They curved into a grove of pines, past the edge of town. By the fading sounds behind them, Pryor knew the townsmen were scattering to their horses for the chase.

CHAPTER X

The Chase

BILLY BREAKENRIDGE set the pace for a mile, then, with a word to Saber, Pryor drew up even with the racing paint.

"Billy, I'm shore obliged," he yelled at the man beside him, "but this ain't yore fight!"

He saw the hard grin that stretched Breakenridge's mouth.

"Mebbe not, but I shore ain't goin' back to apologize to them hot-heads for a spell." He shot a glance over his shoulder. "They're on our tail!"

Pryor twisted around in his saddle, his eyes narrow and cold. The posse was stringing out of the pines a short half mile behind them, like a dark cloud scudding across the green meadow.

"Take over, Pryor!" Breakenridge yelled. "If anyone can lose that pack, it's you!"

Pryor let Saber out a notch, and the racing dun took the lead. He angled off sharply toward a tree-crowned ridge in full view of the posse, and as they neared the fringe of the pines he slowed, jumped from the saddle.

Breakenridge dropped to the ground beside him, scowling.

"Yuh makin' a stand here?" he growled.

Pryor grinned. "That's what they'll think," he said quietly.

They pulled their mounts into the trees, and a shout rolled out behind them.

"They're holin' up! One of 'em must be hit!"

On the far slope of the hill, the Rio Kid swung quickly into the saddle. He

aimed Saber across the clearing, and into the trees at the foot of the slope, Breakenridge following at a hard run.

The trees thinned out after another mile, and they dropped into a draw that gouged at an angle across a wide valley. They rode at a slower pace now, grimly watching their back trail.

Breakenridge chuckled. "They're still closin' in on that hill, waitin' for us to cut loose at 'em!"

Conversation dropped away as they put more miles behind them. Pryor used every trick he knew to hide their trail, crossing rocky stretches and pine-needled groves that would leave no tracks, working down swift-running streams, circling and cutting back to leave false trails.

The sun climbed higher, and noon passed. They came to a canyon, deep and tree-shadowed, and toward dusk climbed out of it on a high tableland. They shoved on until darkness set in, then made camp in a rocky pocket.

"If they find us now, we deserve to be lynched," the Rio Kid drawled.

Billy Breakenridge eyed him quizzically. "Where do yuh get that 'we' stuff," he growled. "Speak for yoreself, Kid. And while yuh're at it, mebbe yuh could let me know why I got myself outlawed."

Pryor grinned crookedly. "Because yuh were fool enough to throw in with Lash Murratt," he said.

Breakenridge stiffened, frowning. "I heard them yellin' about Murratt durin' the fight, but I didn't have time to figger out why. Yuh mean they took you for that killer?"

BREAKENRIDGE, a long-time friend of the Rio Kid's was not a tall man, but there was power in his shoulders and chest and legs. His eyes were clear and steady, his jaw a blunt shelf below a wide mouth that never lost its hint of good humor. He was a man who could find amusement in either a fight or a game, a man who had faced death and violence in many shapes without letting it turn him hard. As he spoke now, the Rio Kid nodded grimly.

"It was the neatest frame I've ever seen pulled," he said. "One of Murratt's men followed me into the hotel. When the clerk wasn't lookin', he erased my name on the desk book, and wrote in Lash Murratt's. Then he plugged an old-timer named Matt Rogers last night, and blamed that on me."

Breakenridge cursed. "Then we'll go back after the town has cooled off," he growled. "Yuh got to clear yoreself, Pryor, or every man in the country will be gunnin' for yuh."

"I'll have tuh take that chance," the Rio Kid muttered. "I haven't got time to waste goin' back now. But I know who that killer is, and his time will come." He went on, quietly telling Breakenridge the details of the lost Cudahay outfit.

"I could shore use yore help on this job, Billy," he finished.

When Greed, Death and Peril Stalk a Union Pacific Grading Camp, It's Up to Captain Bob Pryor and His Fighting Aides to Smash a Grim Conspiracy

IN

RIDER OF STEEL

A Complete Book-Length Action Novel

By TOM CURRY

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

"I'd like to see you keep me out of it," Breakenridge said bluntly.

They finished their meal, and Pryor straightened, stretching the kinks out of sore muscles. He grinned.

"I must look like I'd been caught in a stampede," he drawled. "It's the way I feel."

"I don't feel exactly fit for a tea party," Breakenridge grunted. "But it's nothin' a good night's sleep won't fix up."

He rolled into his blankets, chuckling softly.

"That shore was a glory of a fight," he murmured. "I'll bet I slug gents and dodge lead all night long. . . ."

Dawn broke cool and clear, and when the Rio Kid opened his eyes he stared into the unmoving muzzle of a drawn Colt.

"Get up," the man behind the gun rasped. "Yuh're goin' to take it, but I'm givin' yuh the even break yuh don't deserve!"

The Rio Kid sat up slowly in his blankets, his lips tightening at the cold fury in the man's gray eyes. His guns lay on the ground at one side, but he made no move toward them.

The rasp of the man's voice had jarred Billy Breakenridge awake, and he shoved slowly up to his elbows, kicking his blankets down with stockinged feet. His glance flicked from Pryor to the man standing near the dead coals of the campfire.

The man was tall, with lean shoulders and the whipped-in flanks of a rider. His face was sun-darkened, his eyes gray slits of ice, and there was bitterness in the thin slash of his mouth. He wore his hair shoulder length, plains style, and hatred was in every line of his half-crouching frame.

"NOW wait a minute, you—" Breakenridge began in a flat, brittle voice.

"Shut up!" the man bit out. "Yuh'll get yore chance after I settle with this polecat!" He jabbed his gun toward Pryor. "You gettin' up, Murratt, or takin' it down there?"

"I'm tryin' to tell you—"

"Shut up!" the gunman yelled at Breakenridge.

There was deadly hatred in his glance at Pryor, but the Rio Kid smiled coolly.

"I'll take it here," he said quietly. "But if yuh'd listen a minute—"

"My guns are doin' my listenin' this job," the man grated. "Old Matt Rogers was a friend of mine. I'd have followed yuh to tarnation to even up what yuh did to him." He holstered his gun. "Make yore play, polecat!" he rasped.

Not a muscle moved along Pryor's lean frame.

"I reckon it wouldn't do any good to say I didn't shoot Rogers," he said quietly.

The man's hatred was like a raw flame in his eyes.

"I said draw, cuss yuh!" he flared.

"Yuh fool!" Breakenridge broke out. "He ain't Lash Murratt!"

The gunman laughed savagely. "When I take a trail I don't sidetrack," he bit out. "I picked up one set of tracks outside of Prescott, and they led me here. Lies won't do yuh now. Yuh drawin', or do I shoot yuh cold?"

A chill glint touched the Rio Kid's eyes. He was caught in a split. If he threw his gun he would have to shoot down an honest man. If he refused to draw he knew what he could expect. It was Frontier justice, raw and violent—an eye for an eye, a slug for a slug.

He shook his head slowly, his lips pinched into a thin, hard line.

"Yuh'd better do your job, hombre," he said softly.

The man tensed for his draw, suspicion bright in his narrowed eyes. He was expecting a trick, but it wouldn't stop the throw of his gun when he made his move. His hand started down, swift and stabbing.

"Take him, Pryor!" Billy Breakenridge yelled stridently.

Even as the man's gun slashed clear of leather, he froze. Doubt mingled with the hatred in his face.

"Pryor?" he demanded. "Say, what *is* this!"

Breakenridge's voice came cold and sharp. "I'm tryin' to tell yuh he ain't Lash Murratt. He was framed for that shootin'. He's Bob Pryor!"

Amazement took the place of the fury in the man's face.

"Pryor?" he repeated hoarsely. "Then yuh're Bob Pryor—the Rio Kid?"

Pryor nodded, smiling faintly. "Yuh didn't give me much of a chance to go into details," he said coolly.

The man broke into a bitter cursing.

"Danged if I ever figgered Broncho Charlie Miller would follow a trail all night to commit suicide! And I was about to throw guns with you!" He began cursing again.

Pryor smiled, studying the man.

"So yuh're Broncho Charlie!" he murmured. "I've heard of you, sir."

HE LIKED what he saw, a man with the nerve to back any play he made. An ex-Pony Express rider, and a bronc buster from the word go, "Broncho Charlie" Miller had a reputation for honesty and courage that had spread far across the Frontier.

Pryor introduced Billy Breakenridge, and as the two men shook hands Charlie's weathered face turned hard again.

"Matt Rogers was a friend of mine, and I don't aim to let his murder go unsquared. Yuh say Lash Murratt framed yuh, Pryor, and that's good enough for me. I reckon I'll be driftin' along now, gents."

"After Murratt?" The Rio Kid's voice was coolly casual.

Charlie Miller nodded grimly. Pryor smiled mirthlessly.

"If yuh're goin' after Lash Murratt, yuh could stand a little help, I reckon," he drawled.

Broncho Charlie's eyes widened slightly.

"Yuh mean yuh want to throw in with me?" he asked.

Pryor chuckled softly. "I mean I'd like you to throw in with us," he said, without raising his tone. He laid out the facts in a cool, flat tone. "We're tryin' to rescue the lost Cudahay outfit," he finished, "and Murratt is after the Cudahay gold, and you know how he'll handle that wagon train if he ever locates that hidden canyon. Throw in with us, and yuh can help the Cudahays, and get a crack at Murratt and Jake Ringo at the same time."

"I'd throw in with yuh even if I'd never heard of Lash Murratt," Charlie said flatly. "But if Murratt don't know where the Cudahay canyon is, how could he find out by killin' you?"

Pryor stood up, stamping his feet into chilled boots. He buckled on his guns, and when he looked up worry was in his eyes.

"That's what's got me scared," he said softly. "Ed Schieffelin throwed in with me and my pard, Celestino Mireles. I had to go to Prescott for rope, and I left them in a hideout camp. Since Murratt came after me, it's a cinch he's got Schieffelin's camp spotted. He wants me dead, and figgers he can torture the information from Ed or Celestino."

There was urgency in that thought that drove impatience through Pryor and his two friends. They ate a hurried breakfast, saddled, and swung their mounts out into the gray dawn light. The hours dragged past, and mile piled upon mile, hours and miles that became stifling with heat as the afternoon wore on, and they shoved deeper into Navajo country.

CHAPTER XI

Red Raiders

RIDING through the desert, it seemed devoid of life, and yet Bob Pryor knew they were not passing through unnoticed. Navajo braves, even though they were not a warlike tribe, would be watching from the high crags and domes after the habit of their ancestors.

The Rio Kid searched for them, but saw none. There was something ominous in the way they kept out of sight.

Then, a mile to the east a thin, broken column of smoke climbed into the sky.

"Injun signal," Billy Breakenridge grunted. "Probably passin' on the gossip about us goin' through."

"I ain't so shore," the Rio Kid murmured.

There was something wrong here, and he couldn't find it, something that was getting on his nerves.

"Me neither," Broncho Charlie Miller growled.

He twisted around in his saddle, muscles bunching the lean line of his jaw. Tension showed in his usually lazy drawl.

"Smoke comin' up behind us—another signal off to the west." His narrowed stare speeded up as it swept the ragged horizon. "Blest if they ain't ringin' us in with them signals!" He stabbed his glance at the Rio Kid. "Can you read that stuff, Pryor?"

The Rio Kid shook his head. "The Navajos are new to me," he said.

Broncho Charlie's lips were becoming thin and hard.

"Same here!" he said. "But I've been around Injuns long enough to know they don't turn loose all that smoke talk unless somethin' big is itchin' 'em."

A drum began a low throbbing off to the north, in the line of their march. Broncho Charlie cursed softly, and unconsciously checked the hang of his gun. Another tom-tom began a grumbling that was picked up by others, until the ominous sounds were rolling against them from all angles.

"By glory," Billy Breakenridge growled tensely, "them are war drums!"

The Rio Kid shifted his glance to a rock-crested rise a quarter of a mile to one side.

"Let's drift over that way, just in case," he suggested quietly.

Even as they changed their direction they heard high-pitched yells behind them. Pryor swiveled, to see a band of mounted Navajos flash into view, seeming to erupt from empty desert, guns and bows waving savagely, their bodies hideously colored with streaks of war paint.

"Let's ride!" Pryor called sharply. "Here they come!"

The three horsemen lunged their mounts into a hard run toward the rock-crowned hill. Other bands of warriors were materializing and streaking toward them from other tangents. There was no shooting, and that in itself told a story to Pryor.

"Don't fire!" he shouted. "They want us alive for some reason. As long as we can keep 'em talkin' we got a chance!"

They swept up the barren hill, slapped their horses into the rocks, then dropped behind granite parapets, guns drawn and ready. The Indians converged from all angles until they formed a deadly circle around the hill, whipping themselves into a fury with their war-whoops.

PRYOR watched them until he picked out their chief. The man was powerfully built, stripped to a breech clout, and war-paint made a mask of savagery out of his heavy-boned face. The chief brandished a long lance as he rode the circle of his braves, and gradually his loud oration silenced the yapping of the warriors. Then the chief turned his pinto pony halfway up the hill toward the three white men.

"This is Kuchene, chief of the Navajos!" his voice rolled up the slope, grim and sonorous. "Kuchene orders white men to put down their guns."

Pryor heard the sharp in-take of Broncho Charlie's breath.

"We do what he says, and we'll be dead by sunset!" he grunted.

"Pryor," Billy Breakenridge growled, "tell that old rooster to take a flyin' jump at a gallopin' tumbleweed."

The Rio Kid heard the low savage muttering that rolled around the line of warriors, as he stood up in plain view. The Indians were painted for the kill, and they were eager for it, restrained only by Kuchene's oratory. It would take no more than a careless move, a word, to set them loose.

The Rio Kid touched his chest in a gesture.

"This is Bob Pryor," he called out clearly. "Pryor has many times heard of Kuchene, a great warrior, a great chieftain, a friend of the Great White Father. Now Kuchene and his braves are painted for the war trail. Why? Kuchene wants Pryor and his friends to lay down their guns. We have not harmed Kuchene or his people."

Even as he spoke, Pryor saw his words bring rage to the warriors.

"The white man speaks with a split tongue!" a brave cried piercingly. "Shall we listen to him? *Doh-tah!* No! We kill him and his friends because

they killed three of our people."

A chorus of high-pitched yells answered the brave, drowning out the cries of old Kuchene. The Indians shifted in toward the hill, a walk at first, and then at a trot.

"Rock stops lead better than air, Pryor," Broncho Charlie said. "Get down, man! Here they come!"

And then the warriors were pounding up the hill in a deadly, hard-packed wave.

"Don't fire!" the Rio Kid shouted. "If we kill any of them now, we'll never get out of here alive!"

The Indians came smashing up the hill, breech-clouted braves who rode as though they were a part of the horses under them. Their piercing yells were a song of utter savagery, of bitterness and hatred. Their guns bounced slugs from the rocks around the three white men. Bows were stretched, showering arrows through the air.

Pryor and his friends could have dropped twenty of them in that first mad charge, but their guns remained silent.

The rush of the warriors closed the gap with deadly speed, and Pryor felt a chill in his veins. The Indians raced almost to the crest of the hill, hurling lances that stuck, quivering, in the ground near the men in the rocks.

AND then, taunting and jeering, the red men whirled their mounts and went pounding down the slope through the dust of their charge.

"That was just a teaser," Broncho Charlie said in a cool drawl. "Next time they'll come after blood."

"There won't be any next time," Bob Pryor said grimly. "I'm goin' down there and find out what this is all about." He stood up, his lips hard and determined.

"Yuh'll just get yoreself killed," Broncho Charlie said thinly, but he shoved to his feet, loose and indolent. "Reckon I could use a little exercise," he drawled. Comin' along, Billy?"

Billy Breakenridge pushed out of the rocks, growling.

"I get lonesome when I'm left by myself. Nothin' like havin' company around, even if it's a couple of fools and a pack of Injuns!"

The sight of the three white men walking boldly toward them surprised the Indians, startled them. They silenced their wild yells, began drawing in, gesturing their puzzlement.

"Yuh got an Injun goin' when yuh throw him off balance," Broncho Charlie said, and chuckled.

The Rio Kid's mind was hastily making a plan.

"Way I figure it," he said in a low voice, "this is just another dose of what Lash Murratt gave me in Prescott. I'm runnin' a long bluff. You boys foller my play."

The cool effrontery of the three men blunted the savagery of the Navajos. This was something they weren't prepared for, something they could not understand. They kept pulling in until they made a solid wall in Pryor's path, with old Kuchene sitting his paint pony at their head.

Kuchene was a powerfully-built man, heavy-jawed, impassive, with eyes that were like smoldering black beads. When Pryor halted in front of him, he broke the silence in a toneless voice.

"White men are either fools or very brave."

The Rio Kid stood stiff and erect, his gaze locking with the Navajo chief's. He let the silence drag on, because he knew it was piling doubts into the minds of the Indians. When he spoke his voice was cool and unafraid, grimly blunt.

"We are three and you are many. But we have guns that can kill as quick as a rattlesnake can strike, and many of yuh will die if yuh make us fight. We do not want to kill. We want to talk to Kuchene."

The chief eyed him stonily. "Then

General George "Sandy" Forsyth, Chief Roman Nose, General Phil Sheridan, General George Custer and Lieutenant Fred Beecher and Other Famous Pioneers in RIDER OF STEEL, Next Issue!

talk," he said impassively.

"*Doh-tah!*" a warrior shouted savagely. "No! We will kill them because they killed some of us!"

Pryor stared at the warrior calmly. "Only a fool will not listen to the wisdom of his chief," he said coldly.

"He'll sing a different song if he butts in again," Broncho Charlie said grimly.

Pryor stared at the chief calmly. "Yuh said I spoke with a split tongue when I told yuh we did not kill any of yore people. I am a soldier. Kuchene knows soldiers do not speak with a crooked tongue."

"You are not a soldier," Kuchene said harshly. "A soldier wears a cap and a knife that touches the ground."

Pryor smiled coolly. "I dress this way because I am a soldier who fights only bad white men. It was bad white men led by Lash Murratt who killed yore people. They did that to make yuh want to kill me and my friends."

KUCHENE spat, implacable in his silence.

The Rio Kid shrugged. "If you do not believe me, I will show you," he said levelly. "I know how yuh was raided. The killers rushed through yore village durin' the night, shootin', and yellin' my name, and sayin' they would be back in two or three suns. Is that right?"

Harsh murmurs ran through the warriors.

"See, he knows!" one brave said savagely. "So he is the killer!"

Pryor shook his head. "I know because I understand how Lash Murratt works," he said flatly. "Take me to your village, and I will prove I speak the truth."

Breakenridge brought their horses out of the rocks, and they mounted. Surrounded by glaring warriors, they went to the brush and mud *hogans* of the Navajos. Pryor cut a wide circle around the village, halted near a line of hoof tracks. He dropped from the saddle, his gaze narrow and sharp. When he straightened, he was smiling grimly.

"Kuchene can look for himself," he said quietly. "Look at the tracks of our hosses, and at these tracks made by the killers who raided yuh."

CHAPTER XII

Bullet Blockade

WITH no expression in his stolid face, the Navajo chief dropped to the ground, bent to the tracks. No sound broke the silence that gripped the warriors. Then Kuchene straightened, a faint hint of a smile on his broad mouth.

"Kuchene is sorry. Tracks do not lie. Pryor and his friends did not kill the Navajos." He moved toward the Rio Kid. "Kuchene would like to atone for his mistake."

Pryor was getting anxious over the loss of time, but he answered the chief gravely. "My friends, I would be glad if yuh'd guide us to where we can cross the Colorado River," he said. "In that country there to the north many lives depend on us. Can you help us?"

Kuchene nodded impassively. "It will be done."

He leaped onto his blanketed pony, calling out orders to his warriors. They swung in around Pryor and his friends, and at the chief's signal swept to the north in a hard run.

Guided by the Indians, they reached the river hours sooner than they would have otherwise. Here they found walls of sandstone sloping down to muddy waters that flowed over a wide reef that made a ford during the dry months. This was the ancient crossing used by Escalante and his Spaniards a hundred years before and used by the Indians for generations.

At the rocky bank the Navajos made their prayer to the great river gods. From four small deerskin bags, Kuchene took out four stones, and upon these he sprinkled sacred corn polien. He closed his hand on the stones, held them under the surface of the river, praying for a safe crossing over and back, then released the stones to a swirling current.

"We will cross *Toh Sin-nah* now in safety," he said solemnly.

Praying loudly to the god of the river, the Navajos moved out into the roiling tide, followed by the Rio Kid and his friends. The river bottom was rocky and treacherous, but they made their crossing without disaster.

On the north bank, Pryor thanked the chief, and Kuchene led his warriors back across the river.

"We saved three-four hours comin' this way," the Rio Kid said when the Navajos had disappeared. "If we push on through tonight, we'll pick up more time."

Anxiety was in the Rio Kid's mind as the hours wore on. Dusk came and thickened into darkness, and to the north and west he could make out the black bulk of the butte where Murratt's outlaws had killed the golden eagle. He changed his direction slightly, feeling something ominous in the desert silence. He knew Saber sensed it also, for he felt the shiver that rippled the stripe down the dun's back.

"Trouble up ahead," he said softly to the men beside him. "Schieffelin's camp is in the brush just past the north end of that hogback. We'll move in slow."

But in spite of their caution, they were discovered by the unseen killer gang. As they drew in closer to the tangle of brush, the Rio Kid saw no more than the vague shifting of a shadow, but he knew death was waiting for them.

"They got Scheiffelin's camp surrounded," he warned in a low voice. "We'll have to bust through."

HE FELT the sharp stab of Broncho Charlie's stare.

"Pryor, yuh got cat eyes?" the man growled. "I don't see nothin'. If Murratt's up ahead—"

He got no further. A gun smashed through the night silence, and a man's yell ripped out.

"Riders comin' in! The Rio Kid! He got away from the Injuns! Get 'em, boys!"

And through that shout came Celestino Mireles' thin-edged shout.

"Go back, General! They are too many—they will keel you!"

Rifle fire began winking from all sides along the edge of the brush tangle, and a hail of lead greeted the three riders.

Pryor jerked his guns and sent Saber into a plunging run with a press of his knee.

"Let's go, men!" he shouted ringingly. "They've got the camp surrounded, and we're licked if we don't bust through!"

There was no time that moment for considered thought. Everything was automatic, with keened nerves flashing impulses to muscles that had long been tempered for such violence. The Rio Kid rode low in his saddle, with the night wind sweeping against his face. His guns were roaring savagely as he sent lead along the line of flaming rifles with deadly accuracy. On either side of him Broncho Charlie Miller and Billy Breakenridge added the sound of their weapons to the racket.

Somewhere in the darkness a man screamed.

"Squall, yuh dog-eaters!" Broncho Charlie's yell rang out. "I'm ridin' this job for old Matt Rogers!"

Leaden fingers of death plucked at the Rio Kid's shirt as he hammered closer to the brush tangle. But this was a fight where only raw courage and flaming guns could batter through Lash Murratt's bullet blockade.

He saw an outlaw loom up close ahead of him behind a chopping gun. The shot roared so close that Pryor felt the powder heat, and then the impact of Saber smashing the killer to the ground as he gave one short scream.

The brush was like a solid black wall rushing toward them. The Rio Kid was the first to hit it, with slugs ripping the air all around him. He let his dun pick its course, and Saber smashed the brush without a hitch in his stride. He split a gap between two close-set mesquites and, bending low over the animal's neck, Pryor felt the limbs slash his arms and shoulders and legs like leaden whip-poppers.

The brush became a thousand devils clawing at him, but it blocked the shooting of the killer gang. He slowed Saber's pounding run, and heard the horses under Breakenridge and Broncho Charlie plowing through the brush close behind him.

Ahead and to one side, he heard Celestino's sharp yell.

"Thees way, my General! To your left!"

Pryor swung the dun off at an angle. The going was easier now, but he knew Lash Murratt was deploying his men around the brush pocket for some other move.

THEN Saber halted, and Pryor saw young Mireles standing in the middle of a small clearing, with Ed Schieffelin crouching grimly at one side. Schieffelin straightened as Pryor dropped from saddle. The prospector had a bandage around his forehead.

"Just a nick," he growled, at Pryor's sharp glance. "With them polecats throwin' lead through here for three days, I had to stumble and gouge a thorn into my noggin'. Danged near scalped myself!"

There was a glint of cool amusement in his stare at the Rio Kid.

"Yuh look like you had a peaceful trip," he drawled. "Outside a couple stampedes an' earthquakes and a few gunfights, yuh look like nothin' happened a-tall!"

"I figgered they'd bottled yuh up the way Murratt cut loose on me," Pryor said quietly. "I got back as quick as I could."

"Weeth the rope, too!" Celestino Mireles put in. "Mebbe you have some water, too, no? We have not had a dreenk in two days."

"They pinched us away from the waterhole first off," Ed Schieffelin growled. "That Murratt sidewinder knows more tricks than any gent on Satan's call list. Didn't try to kill us until we'd knocked off three-four of his gunnies. Then he started playin' rough with me, figgerin' he could make Celestino talk after I was out of the way."

They drank thirstily from the canteen Pryor offered, then the Rio Kid introduced Breakenridge and Broncho Charlie.

"Yuh may be young," Billy Breakenridge chuckled to Mireles, "but anybody who can keep up with the Rio Kid is all wool and a yard wide. Glad to know yuh, Celestino."

Silence closed down, for the thoughts of all of them were following the line of the Rio Kid's own. They had to break through Murratt's cordon of killers, and after that lose the outlaws. But outnumbered four to one, they had little chance. Murratt would have his lines tightened by now into a veritable wall of steel.

As the Rio Kid's mind searched for some means of escape, he felt Saber stiffen under his hand. The horse was sniffing to the windward, a faint shiver rippling the black stripe down his back.

That never-failing warning of impending danger! But he could hear nothing, see no movement of approaching outlaws through the thick darkness.

Then a shifting breeze brought a scent to his nostrils, and he also stiffened. Smoke. He swung around to face the men behind him.

"They've fired the brush!" he snapped. "They're burnin' us out!"

But the other four men had already realized that, and their deadly danger. Murratt was forcing them into a showdown against murderous odds! The fire would drive them back until they were thrown under the guns of the killers.

"They'll be waitin' in the clearing east of here," Ed Schieffelin said. He chuckled frigidly, checking his guns. "I reckon we'll take plenty company with us," he said savagely.

CHAPTER XIII

Valley of the Lost

NIGHT breezes brought the growing crackle of burning brush to the ears of the Rio Kid and his imperiled companions, and a ruddy glow was climbing through the darkness. Smoke sifted in around them, stronger now, striking fear into the horses.

Through it all the Rio Kid realized that if they were to escape at all they would have to take a long chance, a thread-thin chance. He shot a swift glance at young Mireles.

"Celestino, you and Ed get saddled up!" he ordered.

"We can shoot better on foot!" Schieffelin protested, but did not hesitate to follow Pryor's orders. He saddled swiftly, and was waiting by the time Celestino was ready to ride.

Pryor stooped, and with his knife ripped up one of the prospector's blankets. He tossed a wide strip of cloth to each of the three men.

"Tie them over yore hoss' eyes," he said. "If we can bust through that fire, we got a chance to lose that gunpack of Murratt's. If we can't bust through—"

There was no need to finish that. He checked his guns carefully, and swung into Saber's saddle. He leaned forward and tied the blanket strip over the animal's eyes, then settled back to give a final word to the other men.

"That fire ain't had time to burn deep, so mebbe we can do it if we take it fast."

They shifted their mounts into movement, a slow walk at first, talking quietly to soothe them. Even brave Saber, unknown to fear as he was, was gripped by an animal's time-long terror of fire.

The smoke thickened rapidly. Schieffelin's mount whickered, and tried to bolt, but the prospector held him back by sheer force of will. They could see the flames now, a solid red wall through the brush ten yards ahead. Miller's horse kicked up and began a mad plunging, but Broncho Charlie brought him under a precarious control. Billy Breakenridge's mount was fighting his bit, threatening to balk in spite of all his rider's efforts to keep him moving.

"I'll get him through if I have to pack him!" Breakenridge declared and cursed hotly.

Pryor felt the first breath of heat against his face, a warning of what was to come. Saber's head swung, nipping Pryor's leg urgently, and the Rio Kid rubbed the dun's neck reassuringly.

"This is it!" he said softly. "I'll lead off. Keep bunched close so yore hosses can touch each other. It might help."

With a low word, he sent Saber forward in a hard run. The roar of the flames drowned out the pound of hoofs. Heat rolled against them, growing in intensity until it was like air fanned out of an open furnace. Smoke billowed through the night breeze.

Bronco Charlie's horse halted, plunging, then came kicking on, close behind Billy Breakenridge's terror-snorting mount. Smoke made vague shadows out of the riders, and heat scorched their eyes.

THE Rio Kid saw Celestino's horse sheer around in mad fear, and with a stab of his hand Pryor caught the animal's bridle, pulled him after Saber. They broke into the line of flames, and the raging heat forced Pryor's eyes shut. He heard Celestino call and cough, but by the strain on his arm knew that Mireles' horse was still in tow.

A fire brand fell on Pryor's arm, but he shook it off savagely. Saber plowed into something solid, and as

[*Turn page*]

he reined the dun to one side he heard Ed Schieffelin curse.

He lost all sense of direction in that moment of searing heat. His lungs ached, and it felt as if every inch of his body were on fire. He felt Saber stumble under him but the dun caught himself and plunged on.

Then abruptly the heat was gone, and a cool breeze was fanning his face. The Rio Kid opened his eyes as he heard Broncho Charlie's thin chuckle.

"I reckon we're safe from Murratt," he drawled. "If I'm like the rest of yuh, we're too black to be seen more than ten feet off anyway." He stiffened suddenly, and his voice sharpened. "Where's Breakenridge?"

"Right here!" came a voice from one side. Breakenridge was just riding out of the smoke, yards up the fire line. "This hammerhead of mine liked the fire so well he just naturally wanted to stay and tromp it all out. If I was hungry, I'd cut a slice off his flank. He ought to be baked plumb through!"

For a mile they shoved their mounts westward at a walk, then when they came to a rocky draw Pryor changed directions, doubling back. He spent an hour using every trick he knew to hide their trail.

"A hound would tie hisself in knots tryin' to untangle the tracks yuh left," Broncho Charlie chuckled admiringly.

"We'll ride till sun-up, then leave a few more puzzles for Murratt's gundogs," the Rio Kid told them.

They halted an hour before dawn for a brief rest, and when the gray light broke across the desert, Pryor rose, stretching the stiffness out of his body. He found Ed Schieffelin seated on a nearby rock, frowning slightly.

"Looks like we won't have to worry much about yore map, Pryor," he said. "If I read signs right, we rode plumb into the Cudahay's lost canyon country durin' the night."

They were on a high plateau, with the desert sprawling out on either side of them to the south. It was a broken country, jutted with rocky domes and spires, gashed by draws and arroyos.

A thin silver ribbon—a stream—appeared as though by magic from the foot of a bluff a mile away. At a glance the Rio Kid knew it to be one of the streams that appeared and disappeared in desert country, rolling on the surface for a while, only to drop into the earth later on.

"That water wasn't on yore map," the prospector said, "but that head-shaped dome to the west was. And there's them three spires to the east. That canyon ought to be somewheres near here, but danged if I can see any sign of it."

BRONCHO CHARLIE was walking up a gentle slope a hundred feet from camp. Suddenly he halted, a hoarse yell jumping from his throat. He turned around and stalked toward Pryor, excitement in his face.

"Last night was as black as the inside of a cow," he said in a croak. "And if we'd rode a hundred feet further on, we'd have dropped plumb through the open door of Hades. Pryor, we camped smack on the edge of that canyon yuh're lookin' for!"

The canyon was different from anything the Rio Kid had ever seen, a natural dungeon carved out of the plateau. No more than half a mile wide and three long, it had no open end to make it a typical box canyon. It was as though some prehistoric giant had slashed a huge blade down into the plateau, lifting a block out of the earth to form the chasm.

The walls were sheer and deep, plunging down to the grass-matted canyon floor six hundred feet below.

"We'll never get down there with the rope yuh've got," Billy Breakenridge said, after a calculating glance down the cliff.

"We can at the south end," the Rio Kid said quietly.

He pointed. Over there the wall was no more than four hundred feet deep. At one time there had been a kind of pass leading into the south end of the canyon, and it must have been from this direction that the Cudahay outfit had entered.

But once the Cudahay's were through the pass, some violent power had destroyed the gap, sheering off

the slope into an unbroken wall that no man or animal could climb.

Pryor's gaze shifted through the gray-blue haze that was lifting out of the valley. Now that the sun was higher, he could make out signs of life on the canyon floor.

A few cattle were grazing near one wall, reddish-brown spots against the green of the grass. There were a scatter of horses milling in a picket-fenced pasture, and he could make out the dun and pale green squares that marked crop fields.

A stream, stunted by the altitude until it was like a narrow silver ribbon, halved the canyon, and there was a small collection of crude log houses in each half.

"Danged if it don't look like Cudahay's outfit is split up!" Ed Schieffelin muttered.

"That's just how it is," the Rio Kid said quietly. "Look close! There's a different flag over each settlement!"

It seemed fantastic, and yet it was true. It was a canyon that time had forgot, dropping away and leaving the canyon inhabitants with the old problems and hatreds of seven years ago! It was a lost canyon where the North and South still opposed each other, where the Civil War was still a bitter and unfinished fact!

For over the cabins on the near half of the canyon floated the flag of the Confederates, the Stars and Bars, and on the far side of the stream waved the Stars and Stripes!

"One side must be the Cudahay outfit," the Rio Kid observed, "and the other side the Union cavalrymen who were sent out to intercept the wagon train. Somethin' happened to lock them in here together, and for seven years they've been nursin' the same old grudges of the War."

It was incredible; ironically deadly. Circumstances had forced both factions to live in the same canyon under a truce, but now all the hatreds and violence of the War was flaring up again. Pryor sensed it as he saw the bustle of activity around the two camps. Men were scurrying like ants around the two settlements.

"They're throwin' up breastworks for a battle!" the Rio Kid broke out grimly. "We've got to get down there and stop that!"

CHAPTER XIV

Civil War

EVEN as the Rio Kid spoke, he saw a small black cloud of smoke puff out at the foot of the west wall, heard the sharp smash of the shot that followed. One of the Confederates took a long step to one side, then melted loosely to the ground. A harsh cry lifted from the rest of the men, and Broncho Charlie Miller cursed savagely.

"That shot came from the foot of the west wall!" he cried. "But danged if I can see the son that pulled the trigger!"

The shot had come from a clearing, but Pryor's narrowed eyes could pick out no sign of the killer. It puzzled him, striking an icy wind down his spine. A murder had been committed right under their eyes, and yet there was no killer to be seen!

"We've got to get down there, I tell yuh!" he rasped. "I've got a hunch that trouble down there is more than any North and South ruckus!"

He spun away from the cliff rim, his eyes searching the country in all directions. Far off to the south—fully a dozen miles away—he could see a thin gray fog of dust at the edge of the desert badlands.

"That'll be Murratt's gang!" he muttered. "They've lost our trail, and they'll never find it in that direction. Just the same, I'm playin' it safe. I'm hidin' our hosses."

But a worry equally as serious as Murratt's outlaw gang filled the Rio Kid's mind. Down in the hidden canyon, honest men were hastily laying out battle lines for a war that would be as futile as it would be bloody. For once their numbers were whittled down by their own guns, the few sur-

vivors could never throw back Lash Murratt's killers, if the outlaws discovered them.

Halted at the south end of the canyon, the Rio Kid threw the heavy coil of rope to the ground.

"Wait here till I get the hosses staked out," he ordered. "I'm leavin' 'em where the crick comes out of the plateau. If we hobbled 'em here, there's a chance Murratt might spot them."

Gripping the reins of the four horses, he nudged Saber down the steep slope. Where the creek burst to the surface from a low cave at the foot of the plateau, he left the horses tied out of sight in a clutter of rocks.

Sweat was streaking his face when he again reached the top of the plateau. Celestino and Ed Schieffelin were waiting impatiently for him. Broncho Charlie was staring off to the south, grinning with satisfaction.

"Murratt an' his gang are headin' off to the east," he informed. "They won't find us now unless they're tipped off, and I reckon there ain't much chance of that."

Pryor selected a scrubby oak on which to anchor the rope, tying the knot, then testing it carefully. He tossed the coil into space and watched the rope snake out along the face of the cliff.

Billy Breakenridge leaned back, grinning.

"It reaches," he grunted. "I reckon we're ready."

"Not yet," the Rio Kid said.

He picked up the rope in one hand, formed a loop above his hand, and another below, then took a half hitch around each of the loops. Separating the three strands of rope between the two loops he opened his knife and carefully cut the middle loop.

A HOARSE oath broke from Broncho Charlie's throat.

"Pryor, yuh gone loco?"

The Rio Kid grinned at him. "This is what they call a sheep-shank knot," he explained. "Shore, I cut the rope, but the knot will hold as long as there's tension on it. But if it was flipped loose from below, it would unknot up here, and the rope would fall."

"But General," Celestino Mireles spoke up sharply, "eef we pull the rope down after us, we would have no way to get out of the canyon."

"At least we'd be alive," Bob Pryor said shortly. His voice was low and flat-toned. "That's more than we could say if Murratt and his killers locate this canyon and come down the rope behind us. He's got enough gunnies to clean us out if he ever gets a chance. So I want this rope fixed in a way that he can't use it, even if he does find us."

Pryor went down first. He eased himself over the rim, dropping hand under hand down the rope, and when he finally reached the bottom of the canyon he saw Celestino swinging out into space.

A sudden foreboding of impending trouble hit the Rio Kid as he saw young Mireles halt his slide down the rope, staring up canyon. Then Celestino's sharp cry dropped to Pryor's ears.

"General, the Confederates are about to attack!"

"I've got to stop that!" the Rio Kid yelled and spun away from the cliff, followed by Celestino's high-pitched cry.

"General, wait! You weel need help!"

But the Rio Kid only lengthened his strides as he swung into a hard run up the narrow creek that split the canyon. The silence in the valley spoke plainly of impending violence and bloodshed, and half a mile ahead men were closing in on each other for battle.

It was unbelievable, and for a moment it seemed to Bob Pryor that he had been thrown back to those bitter and bloody days of the Civil War he would never forget. But this was even worse—it was futile. The War was over, yet here in the canyon it had been kept alive for seven years, even after peace had come to the States, and men were trying to forget the old animosities.

And these were not armies locking in a death struggle. They were

two small groups of men whom mutual hardships should have made friends. But these two thin lines of men were now as determined, and filled with hate as any Pryor recalled in the flaming battles of the War.

Men in blue and men in gray, not numbering more than eight or nine on either side. The two groups halted a hundred yards apart, separated by the narrow stream. One of the Union soldiers was carrying the Stars and Stripes, a Confederate was planting the Stars and Bars.

The silence was like a huge weight crushing down on the canyon, as the two small armies faced each other, deploying grimly. Then the hush was suddenly split to the harsh yell of one of the Confederates.

"Yuh Yankee murderers!" It was an oath, a taunt, a battle-cry, that broke open the door of their mutual hate.

A rifle cracked out.

ONE of the Union soldiers jerked to his toes, twisted around slowly, and without a sound fell to the ground. Then where there had been silence before, there were the harsh curses of men and the crash of shots echoing from the walls of the canyon.

Pryor yelled, but his voice was lost in the racket of the battle. He tried to force his legs into greater speed, his heart pounding from the strain. He saw one of the Confederates go down, then another slipping to the earth as though reluctantly yielding to an infinite urge to sleep.

Pryor came to a bend in the creek, kicked his way through hip-deep cool water, and picked up the bank of the stream again after clawing his way through a thicket of brush. Ahead of him, two gray-blue pools of smoke were floating motionlessly over the battlefield.

He could see the men in blue and gray advancing on each other, rifles cracking, smashing. A man in Union blue was clutching at blood-blinded eyes, stumbling off from the battle at a tangent. Another was on his knees, sighting his rifle deliberately, his lips peeled back from clenched teeth, as his finger tensed on the trigger.

"Stop it, yuh fools!" the Rio Kid shouted piercingly. "Stop it!"

He was on the Union side of the line, and one of the Confederates picked his yell out of the chaos of noise. The man sheered around violently, the blue of Pryor's pants marking him only as an enemy to be killed, not a stranger in this inacessible canyon.

The rifle whipped up in the Confederate's hands, and it seemed to Bob Pryor that he could almost see the slug as it came hurling out of the muzzle of the gun. There was a black burst of smoke, a spitting tongue of fire, and a heavy fist jolted against his chest.

He felt no pain, he felt nothing. All he had was a vague thought that he had been shot by a man he had been trying to save. The realization goaded and mocked him, but it didn't halt him.

He lurched on against the impact of the slug that threatened to hammer him back to the ground. He yelled without knowing he was yelling, throwing his voice harshly through the racket of the battle.

"Yuh empty-headed fools! Stop it, I said!"

Then abruptly he realized he was no longer running, that the shooting had stopped, that his pumping heart was pounding the blood against his temples. The earth was spinning up at an angle, and the canyon walls seemed to be leaning and leaning. . . .

"They're fallin' in on me!" he thought, with odd wonder.

The canyon cliffs kept caving in and rushing toward him until they shut out the sky and turned the world black. A voice came in to the Rio Kid's ears from somewhere, an oath of amazement.

"He ain't one of us! He's a stranger! How did he get in here?"

The earth was dropping out from under the Rio Kid, plunging him through black space.

"Catch him!" someone said. "He acts like he was hit bad!"

CHAPTER XV

Ways That Are Dark

IT WAS the strain the Rio Kid had been under the last few days more than the smashing impact of the bullet that knocked him out. He wakened to find anxious faces bending over him, to hear Celestino Mireles' worried voice in his ears.

"My General, you should have waited until we could help!"

Pryor managed a grin. His vision was clearer now that the mists were drifting away from his eyes. He could see Mireles close over him, he could see Ed Schieffelin, Billy Breakenridge, Broncho Charlie Miller watching him, their faces drawn against the blue of the sky.

He could see a gaunt man in Confederate gray standing at his left, and heard the growl of the man's voice.

"He'll be all right, Mireles. The slug went through clean, didn't hit any bones, and we got him bandaged up before he lost any blood."

Pain was a hundred knives jabbing fitfully through the Kid's shoulder, but strength was filtering back into his body. He sat up, braced by young Mireles' arm, and there was amusement in his sliding glance around him.

The two groups of men had forgotten their hatred for each other in their surprise at finding help had come to them when they had given up all hope. Pryor counted three men in blue and four in gray.

"At least all of yuh wasn't killed off," he said dryly.

A young man, surprisingly young for the uniform that marked him as a captain of a Union cavalry troop, smiled wryly.

"If you hadn't showed up, I reckon we'd have left more back there by the creek, sir," he said.

"It ain't possible to kill too many of you Yanks!" another man rasped.

Pryor got slowly to his feet, studying the Confederate who had spoken. The man was tall, and hatred etched hard lines into his handsome face. But there was something more than hatred in the man's eyes that Pryor couldn't identify—a trace of scorn and contempt, hot pride, a glint of cunning. There was challenge in the man's stare at Pryor.

"The same thing goes for you!" he bit out bluntly. "Yuh're a Unioner! Anybody can see that by the clothes yuh wear."

Bob Pryor smiled quietly. "I fought with the North during the War, if that's what you mean, sir," he said easily.

A flush darkened the young man's face. The gaunt Confederate spoke up sharply.

"Keep yore tongue civil, Russ! Whether he's a Unioner or not, yuh'll treat him like a white man as long as he's on our side of the crick. He come here to save us, didn't he?"

"He come here after the gold!" the young fellow called Russ spat out.

The gaunt man turned to Pryor. Pride held all friendliness out of his weathered face.

"I feel obliged to tell yuh who we are sir," he said stiffly. "This young man is Russ Pierce, the son of the man who was my wagon-boss. I'm John Cudahay." Cudahay motioned to the two men at his side. "These men are Seth Crane and Tom Hollis."

PRYOR nodded quietly to the men. Big John Cudahay went on levelly:

"I'll be blunt with yuh, sir! We're grateful to yuh if yuh come here to save us. But yuh're Northern, and we'd rot here before we'd take help from a Unioner. I reckon yuh understand what I mean."

A girl moved into Pryor's vision, a girl tall and slender, her face pale and drawn under the waves of her dark hair.

"Father!" she cried sharply.

"You keep out of this, Sarah."

The Rio Kid smiled easily. "At least yuh make yoreself plain, sir," he said coolly.

"I meant to," Cudahay said flatly. "One of my men shot yuh, and we brought yuh here and bandaged yuh. We gave yuh the benefits of our

doubts. We've paid our debt to yuh, and now we'll be obliged if yuh'll get across the crick where yuh belong."

"Now wait a minute—" Ed Schieffelin began angrily, but Pryor silenced the prospector with a wave of his hand.

The Union captain drifted forward, his rifle cradled under his arm.

Watching closely, Pryor saw the glance that passed between the man and Sarah Cudahay, read its hopelessness, the pride and loyalty that was holding the two away from each other. Then the man turned to Pryor.

"My name is Dave Hayden, sir," he said quietly. "My father was captain of the Union cavalry sent out here to intercept the Cudahay train. Perhaps you'd better come over to our side of the creek—where you belong."

The Rio Kid shook his head, and young Hayden frowned.

"But you're our kind, sir!"

The Rio Kid nodded easily. "Yes, I'm your kind," he said softly. "And I'm the Cudahay's kind."

An oath ripped from Russ Pierce's throat.

"That's an insult, comin' from you!"

Anger boiled up through Pryor, but he held it back, his smile cool and steady. "I wouldn't break in again, if I was you," he said softly. His warning hit Hayden full on, tightened the man's lips.

Pryor let his eyes travel across the men, Union and Confederates alike, and when he spoke his words were deliberate and meaningful.

"Can't you men see what big fools yuh've been? Yuh say yuh're from the North and South, but yuh was made from the same mold. Yuh're from the same stock that came to this country to find freedom. Yuh fought for it in Seventeen-seventy-six—yore grandfathers did. And here yuh are fightin' each other!"

"This is war, sir!" John Cudahay said frigidly.

The Rio Kid's voice rang out vibrantly.

"It's war because yuh've been locked in here without any way of knowin' what's happened. The War is over—it's been over for four years!"

Surprise came to the faces of the men; anxiety.

"Who won?"

They all seemed to speak at once, as though fearing the answer they would get.

"Who won?" The Rio Kid laughed. "The North and South both won!" he ripped out. "Thousands of men died for what this country has now. They gave this country freedom for all men for all the time, freedom against slavery—"

"So the South lost," Cudahay broke in bitterly.

"General Lee surrendered to General Grant, if that's what you mean," Pryor answered levelly. "But the South won more than yuh know. It won everything the States are now and will be later on. This is *one* country now. It knows none of the States can break away, and when yuh get out of here yuh'll learn the South is glad of it. They're glad to be a part of a nation that is solid and strong. Yuh've been locked in here, hatin' each other for seven years." He glanced around. "How many times have yuh fought before today?"

"None," Cudahay snapped. "We had to keep peace because we depended on each other workin' in order to keep ourselves alive."

PRYOR smiled faintly. "That's just how it is with the North and South now," he shot back. "They're workin' together buildin' what was wrecked because they know they have to depend on each other. If they didn't, some other nation would take them over, and then how free would they be? They've forgot the War, and it's time you men started forgettin' it."

In the silence that followed the Rio Kid saw men in gray glance at each other in question, then look toward the men in blue. Slowly pride drained from Big John Cudahay's weathered face. He smiled.

"Reckon I'm proud to call myself a fool," he said gruffly.

"That goes for me," Hayden said.

The tension broke, as the two groups moved toward each other, grinning. A sense of vast relief rolled through the Rio Kid, but when Dave Hayden moved toward Russ Pierce, he saw Pierce spit contemptuously.

"Cussed if I'll ever shake hands with a Yank," he rasped. He spun, and stalked stiffly away.

Color flooded into John Cudahay's rugged face.

"Russ is hot-headed," he said apologetically, "and his dad was killed by a Northerner. But he's a good boy. He'll come around."

Dave Hayden's stiff lips relaxed into a smile. "That's all right," he murmured.

"Now that we've got the War settled," the Rio Kid said, "I reckon we'd better figger about somethin' more important at the minute. I guess yuh was told about Lash Murratt's gang huntin' this place."

John Cudahay nodded, his mouth tightening. He pointed to a wagon near one of the log cabins.

"The gold is still under the false bed of that wagon," he said. "If we can get it out of here, I'll see that it gets back to the men who donated it. Some of 'em gave their last cent tryin' to help the South. I kept the list of their names, and I want that gold to go back to 'em. They need it."

"We may never get it out of here," Ed Schieffelin reminded darkly.

There was a glint in the Rio Kid's eyes. "We stand a good chance," he said quietly. "This is a big country, and it'll take Murratt and his men a month of huntin' it on the loose to find us. We hid our tracks well, and by that time mebbe we can be gone. The thing that worries me is—"

HE DIDN'T finish that. A premonition of treachery had abruptly come to him, though for the moment he could not place where it might be.

"We'd be proud to have yuh run this show," John Cudahay said. "Anything yuh want from us, just give the order."

The Rio Kid nodded absently. "Gettin' that gold out of the wagon to where we can move it quick if we have to, will use up the rest of the day," he announced. "While yuh're doin' that, I'd like to take a little ride around the canyon, if yuh can get me a hoss."

The Rio Kid's eyes were cold and thoughtful as he rode across the canyon floor. On all sides he saw evidence to the industry of the men who had spent seven years of their life here.

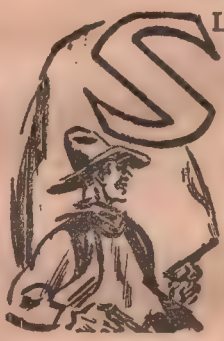
A crude spinning wheel stood outside John Cudahay's cabin, speaking of the wool Sarah Cudahay's fingers had spun into thread for homespun clothing. There were well-tended fields around the two settlements, and the cattle and horses had thrived on the lush grasses.

But in the back of Pryor's mind lurked the growing conviction that there was a traitor among the canyon men. The shot that had been fired, throwing them all into open war had been no less than murder.

And yet it had been murder without a murderer, for Pryor's keen eyes had picked out no living person near the base of the cliff where the shot had been fired. And John Cudahay had accounted for every man in the canyon. What, then, was the answer?

CHAPTER XVI

The Rifle



SLOWLY Bob Pryor worked his horse through the brush that tangled the foot of the cliff, his eyes narrow and searching. But it was not until after the sun had dropped behind the western wall that he found what he had been looking for.

The gun was cunningly hidden between two close-set rocks, murderously arranged. Pryor dropped from the saddle, his lips thin and hard. The rifle was wedged tight between the rocks, and the trigger, firing the murder shot, had been pulled by a thong of rawhide.

"Soaked in water until it was loose, when it was tied to the trigger and anchored to that saplin'," the Rio Kid muttered. "And when the sun came up, the heat dried the rawhide so that it pulled the trigger!"

Someone had wedged that rifle between the rocks so that it would

throw a slug into the Cudahay settlement. Someone had wanted, *planned* to bring open war to the canyon!

The gold was the reason. Pryor knew that with grim certainty. The killer had known that in seven years the country outside must have become settled, and had been playing on the hope that the canyon would be discovered before long.

He must have known about the messages on the golden eagles. And when the canyon was discovered, he wanted to have the gold for himself. Nature had pulled the trigger, and chance had put a man in the path of the slug to make it murder.

Or had it been chance?

The Rio Kid bent, squinted along the rifle sights. They were set in a dead line on the door of John Cudahay's cabin, three hundred yards away. If Cudahay was a man of habit, all that would have remained for the killer to do was plant the rifle, and by trial and error fashion the rawhide to the proper length so that when it dried it would trigger the shot while Cudahay stood in his doorway.

It was simple—murderously simple.

"Cudahay would be dead now if that other gent hadn't got between him and this rifle by accident!" the Rio Kid muttered.

Darkness had closed in when Bob Pryor returned to the settlement on the south side of the creek. Ed Schieffelin, Billy Breakenridge and Broncho Charlie were swapping yarns with Dave Hayden and his men, and Pryor motioned Celestino Mireles to one side.

"Go get John Cudahay," he instructed. "I'll be waitin' behind his smoke-house, and tell him to come alone."

Big John Cudahay came out of the darkness a few moments later, and as he halted beside the Rio Kid there was a puzzled frown on his face. Pryor did not try to mask the edge in his voice.

"Cudahay," he said bluntly. "I want to know all yuh can tell me about Dave Hayden."

Cudahay hesitated, searching Pryor's face.

"There ain't much to tell," he growled at length. "Dave was about fifteen when we was trapped in here. His father, Captain Hayden, figgered some early experience with the cavalry would do Dave good. Captain Hayden had orders to keep the gold I was freightin' from reachin' the Confederacy. He intercepted us out there on the desert, and we had a runnin' battle.

"We stumbled onto this canyon, and figgered to hole up here, but the troops busted in. Rather than let the Union use our gold, I loaded a wagon with gunpowder and set it off in the Pass, trappin' us in here." Cudahay's face was grim and hard. "Captain Hayden was killed tryin' to pinch out the fuse before the gunpowder blew up."

"I reckon Dave hated yuh for that," said the Rio Kid quietly.

CUDAHAY shrugged enigmatically.

"He never showed it if he did. Seemed to realize I'd been doin' my duty. I always admired him for how he took his father's death."

The Rio Kid was persistent. "Do yuh figger mebbe he could have been playin' a deeper game to get yuh?"

Cudahay was careful when he spoke, an honest man trying to give another the benefit of all doubt.

"Dave fell in love with my daughter, I know that," he growled. "But Russ Pierce always swore Dave was out to get me, and a lot of funny things happened. Until today, we lived under a sort of truce. But things happened from time to time. One of my calves was butchered, and Russ said he found the hide hid in Dave's shed when he scouted over there one night. Last fall a range fire almost burned us out over here, and Russ swore he saw young Hayden prowlin' around where the fire started. Things like that, but I never had no other proof against Hayden. What yuh drivin' at?"

Pryor let Cudahay have it. "Just this! If it hadn't been for the man who was killed first thing this mornin' walkin' past y o r e cabin, you wouldn't be here talkin' to me now. Yuh've got a habit of standin' in yore doorway every mornin' for a while, haven't yuh?"

Cudahay nodded. "Shore. What yuh mean, I'd be dead now?"

The Rio Kid reached to the ground, picked up the murder gun.

"I found this rifle set up at the foot of the canyon wall, aimed at yore door."

He told the big man about the rawhide tied to the trigger, then scuffed a match to throw a thin sheet of yellow light across the rifle butt.

Stamped in the polished walnut was, "U. S. Army." And below were scratched the initials, "B. H."

"This was Captain Bill Hayden's gun, wasn't it?" Pryor asked.

Big John Cudahay swore in a low, harsh voice.

"That's the rifle young Dave used to carry all the time!" he bit out. . . .

Close to midnight, the Rio Kid still sat hunkered down near the dying coals of his campfire. The air had chilled, and he could hear the slow breathing of the men rolled up in their blankets near him. Ed Schieffelin was snoring.

Once, an hour or two ago, Pryor had noticed a dull orange-yellow bloom of light low over the east wall of the canyon. He had stiffened, puzzled, but the light had faded as the moon climbed higher. Just the skyflare of the full moon, he had decided, and settled back again, relaxed.

Grim thoughts kept his mind sleepless. It seemed hard to believe that young Dave Hayden had set that murder rifle, and yet the proof was there. Or was it proof? Perhaps that rifle had been stolen to frame Hayden. But that possibility seemed hollow.

"We'll keep still about this," Pryor had told John Cudahay. "If Hayden is after yore gold for hisself, he may trip hisself up if we give him enough rope."

THE Rio Kid's mind was brooding over plans for the next day, when a horse moved out of the darkness. Caution dropped Pryor's hand down to his gun, and then he heard Russ Pierce's cool drawl.

"Yuh won't need yore cutter, Pryor."

Young Pierce slid from his saddle with lazy ease. He was a tall man, catlike in his movements. Studying the man's fine-cut features, Pryor knew Pierce to be a man who could be swayed by a tone or a word. There was nothing stable about him. He could be smiling and likeable one minute and flaring into violent anger the next. He was all the more dangerous because he was unpredictable.

Pierce was smiling now, as he squatted to the ground beside the Rio Kid, and there was a shadow of regret on his features.

"This ain't easy for me to say, Pryor," he said slowly. He seemed to be groping for words. "It's hard for a man that's proud to eat his words. That's what I came here to do."

The Rio Kid nodded. "I reckon I understand," he said gently.

Russ Pierce went on quickly, as though he had carefully rehearsed each word.

"Ever since noon I've been up at the north end of the canyon thinkin' things over."

"At the north end?"

Pierce nodded jerkily. "I had to figger all this out for myself."

He hesitated a moment. The palms of his hands had red furrows in them, and there were a few threads of some thin gray fiber on the cuffs of his shirt. Several scratches ran from rim to sole of his boots, and there was a two-inch rip in the knee of his right pants leg.

Pryor waited quietly.

"What I mean is, I had to make up my own mind about what yuh said this morning," Pierce went on. "I've hated the North almost as long as I can remember, and I had to get that out of my system. Everything yuh said about the States keepin' together is right, Pryor. I know that now."

He stood up slowly. "Come mornin', I'll be proud to shake hands with Dave Hayden and his friends," he said. "That is if he'll accept my apology."

The Rio Kid smiled warmly. "I reckon he will, Russ," he murmured. "If he don't, I'll personally knock his ears off."

Pierce grinned. "Thanks, Pryor. Now I reckon I'll get some sleep."

Pryor watched the man as he moved off through the darkness toward his

cabin. Pierce had a Southerner's hot pride, and it had not been easy for him to swallow his hatred. But sometimes, the Rio Kid thought, there are things greater than a man's hatred.

After a while, he murmured softly, "Well, I'll be blowed!" For the thought that hit him was like a cold wedge driven into his brain. He picked up Dave Hayden's rifle, staring at it narrowly.

CHAPTER XVII

Red Dawn

DAWN broke with streaks of red and gold spearing into the sky above the eastern rim of the canyon. There was a stir of activity around the settlement, men hastily throwing together the few personal belongings they wanted to take with them. Big John Cudahay was passing out brisk orders.

"Make yore packs light, men. We won't have hosses when we get out of the canyon, and we can send back for what we can't carry now."

Sarah Cudahay came out of her cabin with a tray of food and a pot of coffee for Pryor and his friends. Excitement was bright in her eyes and face, and the dark wealth of her hair captured and held glinting rays of light.

"I haven't had a chance to thank you for what you've done," she said simply. "I'd about given up hope of ever getting out of here. It was almost a year ago that I painted the two eagles so they would attract attention, and turned them loose with the notes. A storm blew them out of their nest up on the cliff, and they were young when I caught them."

Pryor smiled at the girl.

"Yuh used your head when yuh painted 'em," he told her. "Any man who saw them birds would try to get 'em."

"Then they're both dead?"

The Rio Kid nodded. "Murratt's outlaws killed 'em."

The mention of the outlaw leader's name brought troubled lights into the girl's eyes.

"Do you think there's a chance of him finding us?" she asked, anxiety in her voice.

"Not unless he was tipped off where this canyon is," the Rio Kid said confidently.

Surprise widened her eyes. "Tipped off? But why—"

"Some men will sell their souls for gold," the Rio Kid said quietly.

"But I don't understand. What do you mean?" Her eyes were troubled now.

The Rio Kid didn't answer her question.

"You think a lot of Dave Hayden, don't you?" he asked gently instead.

She nodded frankly, flushing slightly. Pryor knew then that her father had said nothing to her about where and how Hayden's rifle had been found. Pryor doubted the wisdom of that. The girl had a right to know. Maybe he should tell her, he thought, let her have all the facts before she and Dave Hayden—

From one side, he heard Broncho Charlie's sharp oath.

"Here comes young Hayden ridin' like the devil was on his tail!"

Pryor spun as Hayden plowed his horse to a halt. The young man's face was black with smoke, and anger was hot in his eyes. His voice reached out clear and sharp to all the men running up.

"We've got a blasted doublecrosser in here! Somebody started a fire up canyon to draw Murratt's gang here!" He swung his hand savagely toward a gray column of smoke rising at the north end of the canyon. "I tried to put it out, but it had too big a start. It's in that creosote brush near the north wall, and that smoke won't stop till the fire burns itself out!"

The Rio Kid felt the suspicion in John Cudahay's quick glance. And he knew every man in the crowd was thinking the same deadly thought. Russ Pierce put their thoughts into words, his voice filled with contempt.

"And I was goin' to apologize to you! Yuh doublecrossin' traitor!"

Dave Hayden stiffened as though he had been cut by a lash. His

face grayed, then temper came in a rush, swelling his veins until they stood out like cords across his forehead.

"What are you drivin' at, Pierce?"

Pierce laughed bitingly. "What every man here is thinkin'," he said defiantly. "You set that fire! You wanted Murratt to find us. Murratt will wipe us out, and yuh'd collect a big cut of the gold."

"Russ, that's not true!" Sarah Cudahay cried out sharply.

"Let's don't rush this," Pryor said, but no man heard him.

Hadyen's temper flamed into a violent flare of action then. He plunged across the rocky ground with both fists swinging. Young Pierce met him, laughing contemptuously, brute power in his rolling shoulders. He hurled Hayden back with a smashing blow to the mouth, but Hayden bored in again. The sheer fury of Hayden's attack overcame Pierce's advantage in weight.

They stood toe to toe with both fists slogging savagely. Neither gave ground. They battered each other with the thuds of their blows seeming to fill the air. All their hatred for each other came out in their primeval desire to bruise and smash.

Then Celestino Mireles' voice was driving urgently into Pryor's brain.

"My General, someone ees on the cleeff!"

The Rio Kid whipped a glance up the canyon wall. Recognition hit him with sledge-hammer force, bringing with it a picture of what was to come.

Lash Murratt was up there—Murratt and a small army of hired killers, rifles glinting dully in the early morning sunlight. From their position they could pick off every man in the open on the canyon floor!

Pryor saw the outlaw leader motion into the canyon, saw the killers drop to their knees, rifles swinging up with murderous purpose.

"Take cover!" he yelled.

He saw the surprise of all the men around him, except Hayden and Russ Pierce. They had not heard him. "Don't stand there and gawk!" Pryor ripped out. "Cudahay, get yore men under cover. Murratt's killers are on the cliff!"

Pryor saw Cudahay and his men running for the protection of their cabins, but Hayden and Pierce were blind to everything but their hatred for each other. They stood there smashing with battering fists until Pryor drove his shoulders in between them.

"Break it up!" he bit out harshly. "Yuh want to be killed?"

He took a wild blow from Hayden's fist, knocked Hayden back with a jerk of his elbow, saw blood spill from the man's split lips. Pierce tried to get around him in mad fury, but Pryor smashed him back with a short, curving right that carried all the power of his slab-muscled shoulders.

Pierce hit the ground, bounced savagely to his feet, kill lust flaming in his eyes.

"Cuss yuh, Pryor!" he snarled.

HIS hand slashed down for his gun, but he never reached it. From the rim of the canyon, killer guns roared. Pryor saw Tom Hollis stumble in full run, trip, and sprawl in a heap.

Dave Hayden's hoarse yell broke out through the pounding of rifles.

"It's Murratt—up on the wall!"

Russ Pierce whipped around, lunging into a hard run toward the nearest cabin, slugs kicking up dust all around him. Hayden scurried past Pryor, his Colts smashing futile shots toward the killers on the rim. Celestino's sharp cry ripped through the racket.

"General, over here—queeck!"

But Tom Hollis was still sprawled out on the ground, trying dazedly to climb to his knees. Killer lead was screaming and whining through the air as the Rio Kid zigzagged in a crouching run toward the fallen man.

He caught Hollis under the arms, heaved violently. A slug burned a hot furrow across Pryor's thigh as he started dragging the wounded man across the clearing. Through the smash of guns, he heard Ed Schieffelin's savage roar.

"Give me that rifle!"

And then a heavy-bore Sharps began booming from the corner of Cudahay's cabin. High on the cliff, a thin-pitched cry of agony sliced

through the blaring racket, and Pryor saw an outlaw come plummeting down into the canyon.

The pounding of Ed Schieffelin's rifle drove the killers back from the rim, and the next minute Pryor halted under the cover of Cudahay's log-walled cabin. He lowered Tom Hollis to the ground, threw a quick order to Sarah Cudahay.

"Tie up them holes. He ain't hit bad. Cudahay, drag out all the rifles and shells yuh've got."

But they had no target for the rifles Cudahay brought from the house. Ed Schieffelin chuckled with savage glee.

"They ain't got much stomach for lead that comes their direction," he sneered. "Showed their tails like rabbits when I cut loose!"

"Don't believe it!" bit out the Rio Kid. "We've got eight men here, and Murratt's got more'n twice that, and all of 'em trained killers. He can wipe us out, and he knows it! He's up to some trick—probably tryin' to figger how we got in here."

But the minutes wore on with no further sign from the outlaw army. The Rio Kid crouched at the corner of the cabin, his narrowed eyes like chips of ice. Murratt and his men had not been driven off—he was sure of that. Murratt had enough guns with him to storm the canyon if he ever located that rope down the wall.

And then Pryor felt Celestino's urgent touch on his arm.

"Thees way, General. They have found the rope! All the time, they knew where eet was!"

Even as the Rio Kid whipped his glance toward the south wall, he saw the first of the outlaws start sliding down the rope.

"If they get down here, they'll have us wiped out before noon!" Broncho Charlie Miller shouted.

BUT that was nothing the rest of the men did not already know. They crouched, stern-faced, while Ed Schieffelin emptied the heavy Sharps at the distant outlaw sliding down the rope, a swift, jerky target.

"I can make it hot for that bunch on the rim, but danged if we can do much from this far when they get on that rope. They got us over a barrel now!"

Lead was slapping into the cabin walls again as the outlaws opened fire to cover the descent of the man on the rope. Hard-lipped, the Rio Kid acted on the vague plan he had built up in preparation for such an emergency as this.

"Breakenridge, get behind the other corner, and help Schieffelin worry that pack up there." He whirled around to Broncho Charlie Miller. "Charlie, you and Celestino take the side window! I want that gang kept busy while I make a run for the rope. It's our only chance to keep 'em out of here!"

The young Mexican forced a smile through his anxiety for his friend.

"Take care of yourself, General," he urged, and ran into the cabin behind Broncho Charlie.

The Rio Kid turned grimly. The rest of the valley men were standing by in silence. They had surrendered their rifles to Celestino and the rest of Pryor's friends for the sake of their greater deadliness and now all they could do was wait and hope.

The Rio Kid fastened a cold glance on Dave Holden, motioning to Hayden's horse milling around a dozen rods from the cabin.

"Think yuh can whistle that hoss here, Dave?" Pryor asked quietly. "I'll have to use him."

Hayden nodded, his face still showing his anger. He whistled sharply, and the horse came trotting toward the cabin. Pryor picked up the reins.

"If I can get to that rope we got a chance," he said to John Cudahay. "If I don't make it, barricade yoreselves in the cabin. Lash Murratt and his men are everything low and rotten, so whatever yuh do save one slug for—"

He glanced briefly toward Sarah Cudahay, and her father nodded, white-faced.

"I understand, Pryor. Luck to yuh."

The Rio Kid grinned, an icy twist of hard lips. "I might need some of that," he drawled.

He swung calmly into the saddle of Dave Hayden's roan, bent low over the animal's neck, and spoke the words that sent the roan plunging out into the open in a hard run.

"It's up to you now, boy!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Locked In

HAYDEN'S roan was short-coupled, but he had surprising speed. His hoofs beat up the hard ground as he pounded away from the settlement. Pryor angled off slightly, dropping into a shallow draw that would pull the killers on the rim into plainer view.

Their guns smashed at him from the first, ripping the air around him with stabbing fingers of death. Above that roar, Lash Murratt's distant yell roared out.

"That's the Kid goin' after Dutch! Don't let him make it! Cut him to pieces, men!"

It seemed that the canyon rim was fringed with crashing rifles. Through the line of smoke that connected the killers, Pryor could see the pale flicker of their muzzle flame. But they were being hurried by the deadly shooting of the men Pryor had left in Cudahay's cabin.

The Rio Kid could hear the spiteful bark of Celestino's rifle, echoed by the sullen boom of Ed Schieffelin's Sharps. As he pounded out of the draw and down to the creek bank, he saw one of the killers lurch suddenly to his feet, spin and fall, sliding feet first over the rim of the canyon. The killer caught there, screaming for help that didn't come, then death loosened his fingers and empty space claimed him.

A slug splintered the saddle-horn in front of Pryor, and through the thunder of the roan's hoofs he heard the *spat* of lead striking flesh. The animal stumbled in full stride, but it had bottom as well as speed. And it had courage.

The roan caught its stride, plunging on along the edge of the creek with lead snarling through the air around it. A slug ripped through the collar of the Rio Kid's shirt, but he hardly noticed it.

His mind was on the horse under him, cursing the killer who had fired the slug into the fighting roan.

The animal was mortally wounded, and going fast, but he was still fighting. Blood was spurting from the gaping hole in his chest, and his legs were weakening with each pounding stride. He raced along the creek, each huge breath blowing a red froth into the air, and he was dead when his legs collapsed under him.

Pryor hit the ground running, his guns out and ready. He was still a hundred yards from the canyon's end wall, but the accuracy of the shooting from the settlement was breaking the nerve of the killers in spite of Lash Murratt's efforts to drive them on.

A brush tangle loomed in front of the Kid, and he kicked his way through it savagely. Up ahead, he saw Dutch Kohler let go of the rope and drop to the ground, guns ready.

Kohler fired, and Pryor sheered off to his right, holding his shots. The killer raked the brush with lead, then jumped back into a clump of boulders, hastily reloading.

A hard grin was on the Rio Kid's lips as he drew near the wall. Kohler was hiding somewhere ahead. Pryor slowed his run, conscious that the men on the rim above were no longer shooting. Silence closed in, but with it was an added promise of violence.

IT WAS settling into a duel now, with one man pitted against another. The brush thinned out, and Pryor started across a narrow clearing. His eyes picked up a vague shadow of movement in the rocks ahead, and he leaped wildly to one side as Dutch Kohler's gun roared. He fired once, twice, and the killer dived back into the rocks.

"Yuh got a lot of nerve when yuh're trompin' a man that can't fight back!" he jeered.

He crowded in closer to the jumble of rocks, his eyes alert, nerves like thin-drawn wires. He saw the crown of Kohler's hat drifting along the line of a boulder, and cut a slug through it.

"Murratt, send some help down here!" the killer's harsh yell rolled out.

Pryor edged in close to the sheer

wall of the cliff, dropped to his knees, waiting. He had the position of the outlaw marked now. He could see Kohler's bulky shadow across the slanted face of a boulder.

Pryor crouched, waiting, but the shadow did not move. He grinned thinly. Kohler was cornered, waiting for help to come down the rope. The Rio Kid slid a quick glance toward the rope. It was shifting, moving under the weight of a man sliding down it.

Then from the direction of the settlement came two quick roars from Ed Schieffelin's Sharps. The rope jerked, and Pryor heard a man's choking scream of terror. The rope started switching back and forth, then a solid, ugly smash told Pryor where the outlaw had fallen.

"Hear that, Kohler?" he bawled. "That's the help yuh called for."

"There's plenty more up there!" Fear was in Kohler's throaty snarl.

The Rio Kid laughed jeeringly. "Yeah, but they won't be quick comin' down. Not quick enough, Kohler. Want to give up?"

"Go to thunder!"

Pryor lifted his left gun, leveling it toward the slanting face of the rock. He fired once, saw the gray-white streak left by his bouncing slug. He saw Kohler's shadow shrink, changed his aim slightly, and ricocheted two quick shots toward the killer behind the rock. It was brutal the way he did it, but Kohler was a killer and had it coming.

Pryor changed his aim, throwing each shot until he heard the thin yelp of Kohler's nerve breaking.

"Stop it!" he croaked. "I'll give up! I'll throw out my guns, Rio Kid!"

His guns came curving over the rock to thud against the hard-packed earth. Then Dutch Kohler moved into view, his heavy face gray with fear. His right hand was clamped to his side as though in pain, covered by his left.

"One of yore slugs hit me!" he growled hoarsely. "I didn't think—"

He seemed to break apart, his move was so swift and violent. He leaped to one side, his right hand ripping up to show a stub-barreled derringer. The hideout gun roared, and the Rio Kid knew he had fired that same instant only by the kick of his own weapon.

He saw dust puff from the front of the killer's shirt. Kohler took a long jump toward Pryor, but his

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legs caved under him. He was dead when he hit the ground.

Hard-lipped, the Rio Kid turned toward the face of the cliff. The rope was hanging motionless now, and he gripped it, sent a hump rolling up it with a violent jerk of his arm.

From far above, he heard Lash Murratt's yell.

"Grab that rope!"

But the next moment the rope came spilling down the cliff to Pryor's feet. . . .

It was an hour later when the Rio Kid finally worked his way back to Cudahay's settlement, carrying the coiled rope over his shoulder. The men were waiting for him, hopelessness in their hard faces.

"Yuh kept that gang from gettin' in here," Big John Cudahay said wearily, "and I reckon we ought to owe yuh a vote of thanks. But at the same time, yuh kept us in here! Man, do yuh realize what yuh've done? Yuh've pulled down the only way we had to get out. We're locked in here for the rest of our lives!"

There was a moment when the thing he had done brought desperate thoughts to the Rio Kid but there was a stubbornness in his make-up, a restless energy that drove out all sense of defeat.

"As long as we're alive, we got a chance to get out of here," he said grimly.

He shot a glance along the rim of the canyon cliff, but he could see no sign of the outlaw gang.

"Murratt's called his men back to talk this thing over," he said quietly. "While they ain't pot-shootin' at us, we can get some work done."

"Work?" old Seth Crane snorted. "What is there we can do except wait? Murratt will send to town after rope, and the next time we won't stop him from gettin' in."

"Mebbe we won't be here if that's what he tries," the Rio Kid said. Anger whipped along his frayed nerves. "I'm in as much trouble as the

(Continued on page 82)

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Bullet Money

By TEX MUMFORD

Masked desperadoes set out to grab the mortgage money of the Leaning L—and lock horns with foreman Jed Hunt!

JED HUNT stood just inside the front door of the Leaning L ranchhouse. His strong, young face was dirty and the right sleeve had been torn away. Blood ran down toward his elbow from the bullet wound in his forearm. His eyes were fixed on the slender, brown-haired girl who stood gazing at him.

"Then they got you, Jed." Martha Lane's voice was bleak as she faced the Leaning L foreman. "You're wounded."

"Four men trailed me after I left the bank in town," Hunt said. "Tried to down me as I was ridin' through Apache Canyon. Put a bullet in my arm but I got away and made it to the spread."

"You got the money from the bank?" asked Martha.

"Shore—no trouble in gettin' the two thousand, just like the banker promised yore dad when Seth Lane asked John Garvey about the loan a week ago." Hunt glanced toward a half-closed door at the rear of the big living room. "How is the Old Man?"

"Not much better." There were tears in Martha's brown eyes. "He's so weak, Jed—so terribly weak. If we lose the ranch it will just about kill Dad."

Hunt fired before Wilson could aim his Colt

"We won't lose the spread, don't worry about that," said Hunt. "The old man has until noon tomorrow to pay off the mortgage that Wolf Dover holds on the Leaning L—and I just brought the money from the bank."

Martha nodded as Jed Hunt dropped into a chair beside the table. His eyes were fixed on the heavy bar that held secure the front door of the adobe ranchhouse from the inside. Outside the night was quiet.

Hunt sat motionless, conscious of the weight of the guns in his holsters, trying to feel he was safe now and all danger was over. Yet he was constantly listening for some sound outside that would tell him those four riders who had trailed him from town had reached the ranch.

The oil lamp on the table sputtered a little as the wick burned. Martha went into the kitchen. She came back with a basin of water, a roll of bandage and a pair of scissors, and placed them on the table.

Hunt looked at her, conscious of how lovely she was in the lamplight. It was strange how a man could see a girl day after day like he had for

the last three years and yet never quite have the courage to tell her that he loved her.

HE THOUGHT of the ranch owner lying back in his bedroom so battered and bruised from a fall from his horse that there was still doubt that Seth Lane would pull through. The Old Man had been riding alone back in the hills when the accident happened. The horse apparently stumbled and threw him. Then the animal had run away.

Lane had sprawled there unconscious for hours before one of the Leaning L waddies had run across the riderless horse and gone in search of the boss. It had been Jed Hunt who had discovered marks low down on the bark of trees on either side of the trail. Marks that might have been made by a rope or a wire stretched just high enough to trip the forefeet of a horse.

Everyone in the Big Top rangeland knew that Wolf Dover was a hard, taciturn sort of a man. He owned the Bar D outfit, which was the biggest spread in that part of the country, and there was talk of Dover being land hungry. He had held a mortgage on Buck Wilson's ranch and foreclosed when the smaller ranch owner had been unable to pay up.

"The same thing that happened to Buck Wilson might happen to the Old Man," Hunt said, speaking his thoughts aloud. "Wilson claimed he had enough money to pay off his mortgage the night before it was due. But he was held up and robbed."

"I know," said Martha. "And Wilson claimed the masked men who held him up belonged to Wolf Dover's outfit, though he couldn't prove it."

"Dover didn't seem pleased when the boss told him the mortgage would be paid off tomorrow." Hunt was listening as he talked. Was that the muffled sound of horses' hoofs he heard? "Looks like he's a lot more anxious to get the ranch than to be paid the two thousand."

"You think the four men who followed you from town were some of Dover's outfit?" asked Martha.

"Don't know. It was too dark to see them right good. Hard to tell. I—"

Jed Hunt ducked his head instinctively as he heard the roar of a gun. The sound blended with the crashing of glass as a bullet smashed through a window pane and whistled by his head. He tugged his right hand gun out of the holster and rested his arm on the table as he fired at a shadowy figure outside the window.

Martha grabbed the lamp with one hand and blew out the light as she reached for a rifle hanging on the wall with her left hand. Hunt fired an instant before the big living room was plunged into darkness.

He was on his feet, and with a gun in each hand in an instant. Again there came a shot from outside and a bullet thudded against the back wall of the room. Then there was silence —the acrid smell of powder-smoke lingering in the air.

"Yuh better see if the Old Man is all right," Hunt said in the darkness. "And if they get me don't let me die with my boots on."

A little sound that might have been a sob came from Martha's direction. Hunt stood motionless waiting until he heard her walking toward the room where the ranch owner was lying on his bed.

"I can't let them get her and the old man," Hunt muttered softly to himself. "Got to figger a way to drive them away."

He gasped as a flaming bunch of rags was thrown in through the open window. Before he could get to it Hunt [illegible] white cloth on [illegible] urn fast. [illegible] head." said Hunt. [illegible] basin of water on the flames and then ran to

in their holsters and Hunt recognized Wolf Dover and three of his men.

"I'll tell yuh what happened," said Hunt. "A bunch of sidewinders have been trying to get the two thousand dollars my boss borrowed from the bank to pay off the mortgage on the Leaning L. They tried to drygulch me when I was comin' from town last night with the money. They failed."

"More of Wolf Dover's work," exclaimed Buck Wilson, glaring at the other rancher. "Tryin' to do the same thing to Seth Lane that he done to me I'll bet."

"That's a lie," Wolf Dover growled. "Didn't do it."

"The gang have been holdin' Martha Lane and her dad a prisoner somewhere around here," said Hunt. "Reckon it must be in another cave."

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"Let's look," said Dover, who never wasted words. "Git moving, men."

They found Martha and her father in a nearby cave. Both were bound and gagged. The owner of the Leaning L was unconscious from having been taken so far in his weakened condition. Hunt quickly released them.

"How did yuh happen to come here tonight, Dover?" asked Hunt.

"Saw a hombre actin' suspicious," said Dover. "We trailed him."

"And you expect us to believe that," exclaimed Wilson. "We know you are lying, Dover. You and yore outfit was the ones who tried to get the money so that Lane couldn't pay off the mortgage. Yuh can't get out of that."

HUNT'S mouth straightened into a grim line as he looked at the man who had spoken.

"That's where yuh're wrong, Wilson." The gun in Hunt's hand was covering the former owner of the Flying W. "You and these men with yuh are the ones who have been trying to get the money and blaming it on Dover's outfit."

"Yuh're crazy, Hunt!" snarled Wilson. "What reason would I have for doin' a thing like that?"

"Two reasons," said Hunt. "First yuh wanted the money—and second yuh hated Dover and have been right anxious to frame him ever since he foreclosed on your spread."

"Prove it," snapped Wilson.

"All right," said Hunt. "A little while ago yuh were back there in that cave with Jackson and Benley. One of them called yuh, 'Wolf' and yuh told them not to use that name at the time—guess yuh just wanted them to use it when someone could hear them."

"Interesting," said Dover. "Go on,

sked men

"Too much

the door. He drew back the bar and flung the door open. He stepped outside with guns roaring. A shadowy figure went down beneath a blast of lead and then another dropped to sprawl motionless on the ground.

What seemed like a huge invisible fist struck Hunt on the head. Blackness engulfed him. He dropped to the ground unconscious.

It must have been hours later when he opened his eyes. He grew aware of gruff voices and flickering lights. He appeared to be in some sort of a cave back in the hills. He raised his head and saw there were three men dressed in range clothes standing near the entrance of the cave. Bandanna handkerchiefs hid the lower part of their faces. "Shore would like to know where they hid that *dinero,*" said a big, heavyset man, in a deep voice. "We know Hunt got two thousand in cash out of the bank—and yet it wasn't on him when we searched him."

ONE of the desperadoes cast a glance in Hunt's direction.

"We'll make him talk when he comes out of it," he said. "That bullet just creased him, Wolf—"

"Don't call me that here," snarled the big man. "Remember what I told yuh, Jackson. That goes for you, too, Benley."

"All right, Boss," said the man who had spoken before. "Me and Benley know when to keep our mouths shut. But Hunt will shore speak up about the money when he learns we're holdin' the gal and the old man prisoners."

"Funny about that money," muttered the big man. "Two thousand dollars makes a right big roll of bills. It wasn't anywhere around the ranchhouse. We searched all through the place after [illegible]

"Say, F[illegible] ried. "Yu[illegible] could have been burned up?"

"Naw," said the big man impatiently. "The fire didn't gain enough headway to damage any place where the money might be hidden." He moved toward the cave entrance. "Come on, Benley, we'll get the boys and carry out things like we planned. Yuh stay here and guard the prisoners, Jackson."

The two men departed and Hunt found himself alone with the single guard. The foreman had discovered his hands and feet were not tied, but that his guns had been taken away from him. He felt weak from the wound in his arm. His head throbbed from the bullet crease.

He reached out with his left arm. His fingers closed around a rock the size of a baseball. He sat up and flung the rock as Jackson came toward him. It hit the masked man squarely between the eyes. Jackson was knocked to the ground.

Hunt scrambled to his feet. He grabbed the guard's gun out of the holster just as he heard the sound of horses' hoofs outside. Jed Hunt ran to the entrance of the cave and peered out.

It was almost dawn and he could see six riders headed toward the cave. Not until they drew closer did he see that none of them were wearing masks. Jed Hunt frowned and waited warily, the gun ready in his hand.

The riders came closer and then brought their mounts to a clattering stop as they saw him standing there. The party consisted of Buck Wilson and some of the men who had been in the rancher's outfit before Wolf Dover had taken over the Flying W.

"What happened, Hunt?" demanded Wilson, peering at the foreman who stood at the mouth of the cave. "We heard shooting over in this direction so me and the boys figgered we'd better come and see what was wrong."

Drumming of hoofs sounded and four more horsemen appeared. They advanced with their hands on the guns

for it to be natural if he was you, Dover. I ain't never heard yuh say more than ten words at a time. You and Wilson are about the same size—both big men—but Wilson gave himself away when he told me how he and his men found the cave."

"What do yuh mean?" demanded Wilson.

"Yuh said yuh had headed this way because yuh heard shooting," said Hunt. "Reckon when yuh saw me standing with a gun in my hand yuh must have figgered I'd shot Jackson. But yuh were wrong. Nobody did any shooting around here that I know about."

"They will now!" shouted Wilson as he grabbed out his gun. "Down them men—they know too much!"

Hunt fired before Wilson could aim his Colt and the big man dropped with a bullet in his chest. Dover and his three men were battling the six gunslicks who had been with Wilson. The fight was fast and furious and swiftly over. When the smoke cleared away all of Wilson's men were either dead or wounded—and Dover had lost one man.

DAWN broke over the hills and gave way to daylight.

"Seeing as the mortgage on the Leaning L is due today I reckon I'd better give yuh the money, Dover," Hunt said as he seated himself on a rock. He glanced at Martha who was looking at him adoringly. "Yuh mind pulling off my boots for me, darling?"

Martha tugged off his boots and handed them to the foreman. Hunt reached inside and pulled a single bill out of the sole of each boot. He grinned as he handed the money to Wolf Dover.

"Wilson never figgered that I might have the money in two thousand-dollar bills hid in the soles of my boots," said Hunt. "He kept looking for a big roll, all the time."

"Here's the mortgage," Dover drew out the mortgage. "I knew that Lane would have the money today so I've already marked it paid."

"And that's more than you've said in a week at one time," said Hunt.

"Shore is," said Dover. "Glad it's paid. I like good neighbors. Wilson wasn't." Then he rode away with the prisoners.

"Do you know what you called me, Jed?" asked Martha, later that morning when her father was safely back at the ranch and recovering nicely. "When you asked me to pull off your boots?"

"Shore, I called yuh darling," said Hunt. "And if yuh ain't right careful what yuh say I'm plumb likely to ask yuh to marry me."

"Oh, dear," said Martha in mock distress, her eyes shining. "And I always am so reckless with words!"

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He ducked, bringing his gun muzzle up and sent a quick desperate shot

Six-guns roar wildly when Johnny Rivers hightails it after bandit Utah Shane!

BATTLE SPURS

By GUNNISON STEELE

NOBODY outside the Ute Gap bank had any idea the bank was being robbed, until a gunshot blasted. That was when Utah Shane, out of snake-meanness, put a bullet through the cashier's shoulder because he had protested.

"You won't get away with this, Shane!" the cashier blurted. "You've robbed and killed too long—"

The shot jarred Ute Gap out of its midday doze. By then Utah Shane

had backed to the doorway, his twin six-guns weaving, a mocking grin on his dark, buck-toothed features. He whirled, leaped to the ground and ran toward a nearby alley, the big silver spurs he wore jangling loudly. He reappeared an instant later, astride a powerful roan, and spurred swiftly along the street.

Men appeared in doorways, stared in a puzzled fashion at the racing horseman, at the bulging gunny-sack swinging from his saddlehorn. They didn't connect him with the gunshot, until old Scraggs, the banker, appeared in the bank doorway.

"It's Utah Shane!" Scraggs squalled. "He's shot Rolf and cleaned out the bank!"

Ute Gap came wide awake then. A gun roared and a bullet sang its shrill song. But now it was too late. Utah Shane was at the upper end of the street, rolling the silver spurs, his fierce, derisive yells floating back.

The watchers saw him fade from view as he raced toward the far dark hills that bristled like a wolf's hackles along the northern horizon.

Then a score of men converged on the bank. Besides banker Scraggs and Gabe Rolf, the skinny, bald cashier who had been shot, two other men had been in the bank when it was robbed —a fat, bearded rancher named Frawley, and Johnny Rivers.

The cashier wasn't badly hurt. Frawley was holding him partially upright, and demanding in a loud, authoritative voice that somebody get a doctor. Old Scraggs was babbling excitedly, telling what had happened.

Nobody paid any attention to Johnny Rivers.

Johnny stood to one side, looking a little dazed. He was blocky, red-haired, freckle-faced. He was well-liked on the Ute Gap range, but nobody took him very seriously.

"That hombre's so peaceable it hurts," they said. "He wouldn't swat a fly if it was coming at him with a six-shooter!"

JOHNNY RIVERS just grinned and had taken their razzing good-naturedly. He was as strong as a young bull, he had never seen a wild bronc he couldn't ride, he was quick with a six-gun and a dead shot. He just didn't like trouble and fighting. Fighting was messy, and it got you nowhere, he said. And he hardly ever wore a gun, because guns were likely to cause trouble.

So he had grinned a lot, and let folks shove him around. If there was one thing he was proud of it was his riding ability, and the trophies he'd won at rodeos. The walls of his little Jinglebob ranchhouse were lined with them. Now Rivers listened.

"It's an outrage," banker Scraggs was saying bitterly. "For years this Utah Shane has run wild, looting and killing, and nobody seems able to do anything about it. Where's Sheriff Hendricks?"

"Headed out for Dave Starr's place a couple of hours ago," somebody said. "Mebbe he won't be back till night."

"Meanwhile, Utah Shane will make his getaway into the hills, as usual, where his hideout's never been found. Anybody want to organize a posse and ride after Shane now?"

Feet scraped the floor uneasily, but nobody said anything. Utah Shane was a *malo hombre*, a killer. The bank had lost a lot of money, maybe enough to break it, but nobody wanted to risk his life in trying to retrieve it.

"Will somebody gimme the borrow of a gun?"

Everybody turned quickly and looked at Johnny Rivers. He had spoken softly, almost casually, but there was an unaccustomed grimness about his freckled face.

"What did yuh say, younker?" Frawley asked.

"I said, will somebody gimme the borrow of a gun? I left mine at home."

"What'n tarnation you-all want with a gun?"

"Why, to go after Utah Shane. And

I'm in a hurry—every passin' minute gives him that much more start. You, Mister Frawley—can I borrow yore gun?"

Frawley gaped with unbelief.

"Why—why—" he stammered.

Then he unbuckled his gunbelt and gave it to red-haired Johnny Rivers.

Johnny slapped it about his waist, taking it up to the last notch. He started for the door.

"Yuh gone loco, kid?" Frawley blurted. "Utah Shane's bad—he'll pin back yore ears and swaller you whole."

"Shane's gone too far this time," Johnny said over his shoulder. "He can't get away with it. I'm bringin' him back!"

He went out, along the street to the livery, where he slapped bridle and saddle on a big, long-legged, powerful black gelding. The trappings on saddle and bridle, which he'd won at rodeos, gleamed in the sun as he mounted and rode swiftly out of town.

Those who had come out of the bank, stared with dazed disbelief after Johnny Rivers. Johnny Rivers, who had grinned and talked his way out of countless fights—riding after Utah Shane!

"Mebbe it was seein' Gabe Rolf shot down like that which done it," somebody suggested.

"More likely that little pile of money the kid had on deposit from that cattle sale a month ago. Johnny's scared the bank'll go bust and he'll lose it!"

UTE GAP faded behind and Johnny Rivers rode fast across the prairie. A strong wind beat at his set face, tore his battered hat away, and his hair streamed like a red banner. The big black ran smoothly, but powerfully, its great muscles rippling. The black could outrun anything in the country.

The dust of Utah Shane's going had faded, but his horse's tracks were plain on the ground. Shane was an almost legendary figure. For half a dozen years he had roamed that part of the country, robbing and killing, laughing at the law. Always, after a raid, he made it into the rough hills, where he vanished.

Johnny Rivers did not think about how incongruous it was for him to be riding after Utah Shane.

"A man's loco to fight with his friends, and I don't have no enemies," he had said.

But now a cold anger streamed through him. There were limits to the things a man could stand for. What Shane had done was one of them.

A thin plume of dust appeared ahead, and soon Rivers could see a racing horseman. He had been holding the black in, but now he spoke softly, and the black's belly seemed almost to touch the ground. Gradually, Rivers closed in on Utah Shane.

They were in rougher country now. Level prairie had given way to low, pine-studded hills and red sandstone cliffs. A few miles ahead the foothills merged with a confused world of deep canyons, weird rock formations and caves. Here, if he could reach it, Utah Shane would again vanish.

Shane had seen the rider behind him. He was quirting the tired roan and goading it mercilessly with the silver spurs. But the roan was no match for the black. Slowly the distance between them lessened. Now Johnny Rivers was close enough to see the rage on Shane's dark, weasel-like face as he stared back at his pursuer.

Rivers saw a blob of smoke spear out from Shane, heard the shrill whine of a bullet. Relentlessly, his gun still holstered, Johnny Rivers drove in closer. The first bullet had fallen short, but the second snapped waspishly past his head. He hugged the black's neck and bored in.

Utah Shane fired again, and again, but the plunging horse ruined his aim. Rivers drew his gun. Now sixty yards

separated them, now forty.

Then suddenly Utah Shane jerked the roan back on its haunches. The beast reared, whirled, beating the air with its forefeet. Then Shane drove in the spurs savagely, and the roan hit the ground and drove straight at Johnny Rivers.

Rivers was caught by surprise. Instantly, he saw that Shane meant to crash into the black, knock Johnny Rivers off balance, and hurl him to the ground.

Before he could force his muscles to do his mind's bidding, Shane would smash into him.

But the black, acting instinctively, plowed its hoofs into the earth, at the same time dodging aside with a sinuous twist of its powerful body. Almost unseated by the move, Johnny Rivers grabbed for the saddlehorn with one hand, turned—and saw Shane reaching for his gun.

Rivers ducked, bringing his gun-muzzle up and sent a quick, desperate shot. Powder from Shane's two answering shots scorched his face and throat. He perked the black around on its hind legs. Shane's roan had stopped, whirled, blocked by a wall.

Johnny Rivers gun leveled. Then his finger eased up on the trigger, and he stared with wide-eyed surprise. Utah Shane had dropped his gun and was swaying drunkenly in the saddle. His head rolled crazily. Then, very slowly, Shane slid from the saddle down to the ground and lay still.

GUN in hand, Johnny Rivers dismounted. He could have sworn his quick shot had missed. But Shane lay motionless, on his face, knees drawn up grotesquely.

Johnny Rivers stooped over the killer, caught him by the shoulder and turned him partially over. And, like a striking rattler, Shane moved. An arm that had been doubled under him, lashed savagely out, his hand cupping a slab of jagged rock.

Rivers ducked under the blow that was meant for his head. It hit him a glancing blow on the wrist, knocking the gun to the ground and numbing his arm.

He lunged at Shane, threw his arms about him and smashed him back to the ground.

Shane had dropped the rock. But now he hammered at Johnny's face with short, jarring blows.

"Too smart for yuh, wasn't I?" he jeered. "If you'd counted my shots, you'd have knowed my gun was

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empty. Now I aim to tear you apart!"

But Johnny Rivers had different ideas about that. He tore loose from Shane's bear-like arms, stumbled to his feet, eyes stabbing at the ground for the gun he'd dropped. But the gun had evidently been kicked into a crevice, or over the edge of a wall twenty feet away, in the wild scramble.

Utah Shane was lunging in like a mad bull, head lowered, great arms outstretched. Johnny Rivers braced his blocky body and hammered his fist into Shane's face. The killer grunted, reeled back, shaking his head dazedly.

Johnny Rivers leaped in. But Utah Shane fell forward, fastened his arms about Rivers' waist and pulled him to the ground. Locked, they rolled over and over, mauling, clawing. Rivers gasped as fiery pain shot through his thigh.

Shane grunted with vicious triumph and again the big, needle-sharp silver spurs raked Johnny Rivers from hip to knee, slashing through trousers and flesh.

"Yuh dirty-fightin' skunk!" Rivers grunted and slammed his fist against Shane's already bloody nose.

But Shane did not loosen his crushing grip. The gleaming spurs, now red-stained, kept up their deadly work, gouging, slashing, jabbing.

Suddenly Johnny Rivers had the sensation of falling through space. He looked down, saw brown, shaly rock rushing to meet him, and knew that they had rolled over the rim of the slanting, broken wall. He twisted desperately to get Shane under him.

They struck the narrow ledge with a jarring thud. The ledge crumbled under their weight, and they rolled on down the wall, turning over and over like pinwheels. Fierce, numbing pain shot through Rivers as he scraped over the jagged rocks and crashed through thorny brush.

It seemed like ages before he brought up with a final hammering jar on a pile of shale at the foot of the walls. He grabbed a piece of shale half the size of his head, and reeled to his feet, ready to meet Utah Shane's savage charge.

But Utah Shane lay sprawled on the ground ten feet away. He was very still and peaceful looking.

TWO hours later, as he was riding back across the plain toward Ute Gap, Johnny met a bunch of gun-belted riders that were headed by Sheriff Hendricks. The possemen stopped, first staring at Johnny Rivers and then at the bound figure of Utah Shane on the horse behind him, in amazement.

Johnny looked as if he had been run through a grinding mill. His freckled face was battered, bloody. His clothes were ripped to shreds. Utah Shane looked even worse.

They crowded about Johnny Rivers, awe in their eyes, asking questions. Briefly, Johnny told what had happened.

"That musta been a slam-bang battle," grinned a puncher. "I'd have give a month's pay to see it."

"Wasn't no sense to fightin'," Johnny Rivers declared. "But Shane wouldn't give hisself up no other way, so I had to do it."

"Naturally," rancher Frawley agreed pompously. "I see yuh have the bank's money there. I said all along, when folks were sayin' you didn't have the spirit to fight, that only some great public duty such as this was required to bring out the man in you!"

Johnny Rivers looked down at the shiny silver spurs on his bootheels.

"Public duty be danged," he said, grimacing with pain. "I wasn't worryin' about the bank's money. Utah Shane took a shine to these spurs, which I'd won in a buckin' contest down at Painted Rock. When he made me shed 'em back there in the bank, he went too far. I just *had* to get 'em back!"

THE SINEWS OF VICTORY

A Tribute to America's Heroes of Production

By MAJOR GENERAL E. B. GREGORY

Quartermaster General, United States Army

Photo U. S. Army Signal Corps
MAJOR GENERAL GREGORY

THE production side of this war will be won by Americans who do the small things well, whether it is making a rivet for a tank or sewing a sleeve in an Army uniform.

The casual onlooker is too apt to think of war production just in terms of big tanks, giant bombers, long-range guns and fighting ships.

These are vitally necessary. But in this war, as in every war, the men who fight are human beings. They must have food, clothing and shelter before they can be expected to fly their planes, fire their guns or sail their ships.

Throughout America today, there are millions of workers turning out clothing and tents, growing and processing foodstuffs, building barracks, raising horses and mules—all absolute necessities to the Army, all direct contributions to ultimate victory.

When historians write down the heroes of production in this war, they will spotlight those who served faithfully in the production of necessities that keep our fighting men and equipment in operation. The heroes will be the men and women who did their duty at every place in the production line.

(Continued from page 70)

rest of yuh," he declared. "Do yuh want to stand here whinin' about it, or do yuh want to try to get out?"

"You elected him boss—now do what he says!" Sarah Cudahay spoke up sharply.

Dave Hayden moved forward hesitantly. "I know what you think of me," he said bluntly, "but if I can do anything to help you get Sarah out of here, speak it out."

The Rio Kid smiled faintly. "The time for yuh to worry about what I think of yuh is when I tell yuh to go for yore gun," he said. "Thanks, Hayden. Go bring up some hosses. We'll need a couple teams."

The volunteering of Dave Hayden seemed to sting the pride of the others.

"If yuh want to help, the rest of yuh start tearin' about a dozen logs out of this cabin," Pryor said grimly.

Surprise showed in the faces of the valley men, then understanding struck big John Cudahay.

"Yuh think we can float down the stream on a raft?" he demanded. "It won't work, Pryor. We thought of that seven years ago. The crick cuts into the wall, and there's no tellin' where it goes."

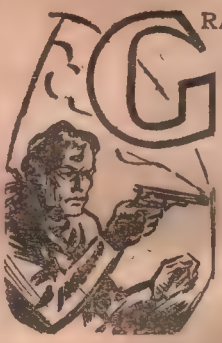
"There's a stream comin' from the foot of the plateau down below," Pryor said. "I had that in mind when I fixed that rope so's I could pull it down here, and keep Murratt's men from usin' it. It's a chance."

Cudahay snorted wearily. "Mebbe it's the same crick that's in here, and mebbe it ain't," he growled. "We couldn't get through if it was the same crick. There's a rapids a hundred feet inside the wall. One of my men drowned findin' that out. We'll all be killed if we try that way out."

"Yuh'll all be killed by Murratt's men if yuh stay here," the Rio Kid reminded spiritedly. "My way gives us a chance anyhow. Now get to work draggin' them logs down! We'll wait till after dark to build the raft. We don't want to tip Murratt off."

CHAPTER XIX

Into the Unknown



GRAY of twilight changed swiftly to darkness in the narrow canyon, and Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, was the last to leave the wrecked cabin. It was while he was moving away from the cabin after the others that he noticed the white sheet across the low roof.

It halted him stiffly, for across that white spread of cloth he could make out the vague black outline of an arrow pointing in the direction of the creek where it disappeared into the canyon cliff.

He cursed softly, understanding driving like a cold blade into his brain.

"Someone tipped Murratt off again!"

He moved to the eaves, reached up to the roof, rubbed his finger through the black smear that formed the arrow. He examined it narrowly under the yellow light from a match.

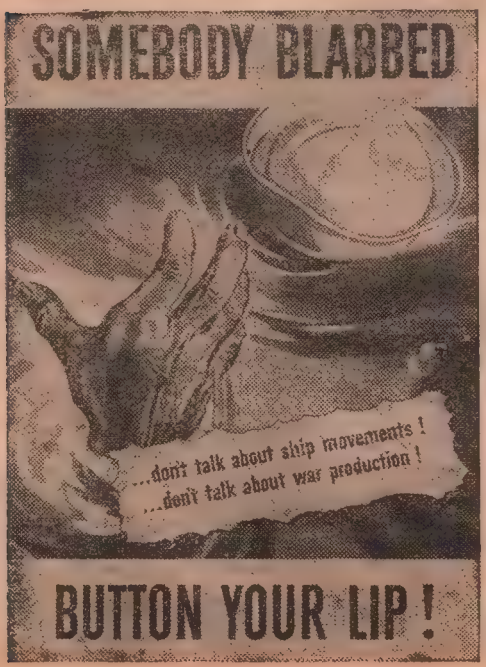
It was soot from the stove in Cudahay's cabin.

Thin-lipped, he strode off through the night toward the creek. He found Cudahay helping roll the heavy logs into place, and with a motion of his hand drew the big man back from the others.

"Who packed yore things for yuh?" Pryor asked grimly.

Cudahay scowled in the darkness. "Sarah, of course," he growled. "She got young Hayden to help her. She still believes in him, so—" He broke off sharply. "Why?"

The Rio Kid's voice was flat and savage. "Sometime this afternoon, one of yore white sheets was pinned out on the roof. Whoever did that smeared a black arrow across it with soot, tippin' Murratt



off what we are doin'. So young Hayden was inside yore cabin, huh?"

John Cudahay's temper flamed as the full meaning of Pryor's words got to him.

"I reckon that's enough for me," he said, and swore luridly. "If we get out of this alive, I'm goin' to settle with that double-crosser myself!"

The moon was climbing into the sky when they skidded the heavy raft into the creek, and loaded it. Pryor ordered the gold ingots distributed to balance the weight, then moved off to make his final preparations.

He anchored his rope firmly around a boulder just outside the cave into which the stream disappeared, then ordered the men to pole the raft free of the sand bar. The current caught it, started to spin it.

"Use them poles!" Pryor called out. "Keep it straight, men!"

He waded out into the stream, and climbed aboard when the raft reached him. They moved into the cave, into utter blackness. The current became a monster reaching out of the bowels of the earth for them.

"Dig them poles in!" Pryor ordered the men. "Celestino, you and Charlie give me a hand with this rope. We ain't got a chance if we don't keep this raft under control!"

Braced against the heavy logs, the three men played the rope out in their hands, fighting against the drag of the current. Cudahay, Russ Pierce and the others were digging long poles into the creek bed to slow the raft, keep it under control.

THERE was a deep-throated growling in the blackness ahead, a sound that was like a subterranean beast snarling at them.

"Here comes the first rapids!" Seth Crane said, and there was a hint of terror in his voice.

The Rio Kid, as coldly reserved as he was, felt some of that same animal terror. Into the unknown, that was where they were going. Out of the world they knew, and into the middle of the earth, where even the torch Sarah Cudahay had lighted was feeble and sickly.

The flickering yellow light was almost worse than complete darkness. It showed low-hung walls, and empty caverns, and the ink-black waters that clawed and churned around the raft.

"Never knew I'd go to old Satan on a log!" Billy Breakenridge sang out cheerfully.

A current sheered the raft around dangerously, but the men straightened it with violent heaves on their poles. They hit the rapids, and it seemed to Pryor the rope was going to drag his arms out of their sockets. Close to him, he could hear the harsh breathing of young Mireles and Broncho Charlie, as they threw their strength against the drag of the current.

Had they been floating free here, they would have been smashed to pieces in the first dozen yards, the current was that savage.

Gradually the racing waters slowed, and the whispering of the stream seemed like sibilant curses in the silence. Pryor lost all sense of time, but he knew their progress along the underground stream was painfully slow.

"It was after two in the mornin' when we started out," Ed Schieffelin growled. "I wonder what time it is now."

The yellow light from the girl's torch flowed along black-glistening walls, and at places they had to crouch low to escape the low ceiling. At times there was empty space as high as the torchlight reached.

The stream deepened as the current slowed, and then big John Cudahay broke his news with a growl.

"I can't touch bottom no more!" he said hollowly. "It's up to yore rope, Pryor."

His hands sore from constant gripping, the Rio Kid felt the end of the rope slide through his palms.

"The rope is played out," he said quietly.

Tom Hollis, wounded and lying on the floor of the raft, began praying in a low voice.

Sarah's torch burned out a short while later, and they were left in a world of utter blackness. Pryor sat down, waiting with resigned patience. The stream, he knew well, could flow on for miles underground, perhaps never again reaching the surface. But it had offered a chance of escape—their only chance. He was not afraid of whatever lay ahead for him. It was the others he worried about.

There was no sense of movement in that black silence. He kept shifting his glance, searching until his eyes ached. The raft scraped along the wall, and Broncho Charlie grunted a tense warning.

"Duck low! The ceilin' is pinchin' down."

PRYOR could hear the soft whispering of Dave Hayden and Sarah Cudahay. He wondered what she would do if it were proved that Hayden had doublecrossed them. Or would it ever be proved? The thought traced a half-smile across the Kid's hard mouth.

The ceiling lifted again, and Pryor relaxed slightly. There seemed to be a thin crack in the darkness ahead, but as it disappeared his hope sagged. His eyes were playing tricks on him, he decided.

But there was the crack of light again, wider this time. He watched it grow

slowly, said nothing for fear of stirring up false hopes. He tensed, straining. The gray crack kept growing.

"Daylight up ahead!" Dave Hayden sang out sharply.

Ed Schieffelin began swearing with deep feeling, and a low sob of relief broke from Sarah Cudahay's throat.

The darkness of the cavern was fading into a gray gloom that outlined the men crouching on the raft. Russ Pierce's mouth was screwed up with tension, but anxiety was draining from the faces of the others. Pierce was fingering his gun nervously, and he shunted a narrow glance toward the Rio Kid.

"We're actin' like this was a hay ride party," he grated. "I think we ought to be on guard."

The Rio Kid's expression was as blank as his voice.

"Against what?" he drawled. "We've lost Murratt's gang. They're still up on the plateau, tryin' to figger a way to get into the canyon."

There was heat in Russ Pierce's glance that shot toward young Hayden. His stare flicked back to Pryor meaningly.

"No sense takin' chances with a sidewinder among us," he snapped. "Murratt *could* have been tipped off again."

The Rio Kid nodded. Pierce had told him no more than he had already known. He had been playing his cards close, trying to catch some unguarded expression in Hayden's eyes. Had that been fear he had seen flicker in the man's stare?

There was a quiet chill in the Kid's voice when he spoke.

"We're floatin' into all the trouble Lash Murratt can throw at us!" he said. "Get yore guns ready, men! Yuh'll need 'em!"

Inferno broke loose around them the minute they floated out of the cavern. As alert as Pryor was, it was Russ Pierce who opened the play.

"Up in the rocks!" Pierce snarled, and the roar of his gun cracked the early morning silence into splinters.

Through the roar of Pierce's gun, Lash Murratt's booming yell whooped out.

"Here they are, boys! Gun 'em down, and collect yore pay!"

The killers were in the rocks that slanted up from the creek bank, their guns snouting down the slope for the kill. In the first flash of his glance, Pryor saw that they numbered close to twenty, more than enough to wipe out those on the raft in spite of the gun accuracy of such fighting men as Ed Schieffelin, Broncho Charlie Miller, and Billy Breakenridge.

But even as the killer gang leaped to their murderous work, the guns of the Rio Kid flamed into life, smashing with an unexpected fury that drove the outlaws back. He swept a deadly hail of lead through the high rocks and the sheer savagery of his fire sent them plunging for cover. Crouching behind kicking weapons, he yelled to the men around him.

WE'LL be cut to pieces if we stay on this raft!" he shouted. "Get into them rocks on this side of the crick. Hayden, stop shootin', and help the girl!"

He stepped off into the water, the last to leave the heavy raft, and even as he kicked through the current toward the shore, he saw the logs scrape into a sand bar and halt. Celestino Mireles and Broncho Charlie were at his side, their guns seeming to shake the dawn sky with their roaring.

Ed Schieffelin and Billy Breakenridge were backing away at an angle, their teeth clenched, their guns booming and flaming like living things. Big John Cudahay had picked up Tom Hollis in his arms, and was heading into the rock tangle at a stumbling run. He disappeared, then lunged into view an instant later behind a blazing Colt.

The fury of their shooting covered them until they were safely covered by the rocks, but Pryor knew they had gained only a temporary respite from the guns of the outlaws. As greatly outnumbered as they were, and with Murratt spreading his men out to higher ground where they could pick off the men below it could only be a matter of time until the canyon people were routed.

"Keep low, and call yore shots!" the Rio Kid yelled. "We're bottled up, but we'll

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take as many as we can with us!"

A killer showed himself fleetingly, and flopped heavily, rolling down the slope in a loose heap at the smash of the Rio Kid's gun.

Ed Shieffelin emptied his Colt, then tossed the weapon aside, cursing acidly.

"Blast a short gun!" he growled, and dragged a rifle across the rock behind which he crouched.

Broncho Charlie was stretched out behind a low granite parapet, his long hair flowing back over his shoulders, a smile frozen on his lips as he worked his guns. Billy Breakenridge was close by Miller's side, his keen blue eyes trying to locate the gunmen who were smashing lead into the gravel around him. Death was striking close to Breakenridge, but it didn't shake his iron nerves.

Pryor picked out the killer, hunkered down behind a scrubby tree high up on the steep slope.

The man screamed, jerked convulsively, and sagged to the ground at the kick of the Rio Kid's gun.

The would-be rescuers of the canyon folk were taking a heavy toll of the outlaws, but Pryor knew their minutes were numbered. One of the Union troopers was slumping limply to the ground, dead from a slug that had plowed into his chest. Blood was sheeting down the face of the man sprawled out beside John Cudahay, but the man emptied his guns even as consciousness drained from him.

CELESTINO'S cry reached the Rio Kid's ears.

"General, ees there not sometheeng we can do? We have no chance eef we stay here!"

"We ain't got a chance if we try to leave!" Pryor flung back.

Then abruptly it seemed the air shook to the thunder of running hoofs, the shrill yelp of voices, the twanging of bow strings. A cloud of arrows ripped through the air to curve into the rocks around the outlaws.

"Kuchene's Injuns!" Ed Schieffelin yelped. "They've been on Murratt's trail since we left 'em!"

[*Turn page*]

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CHAPTER XX

Sidewinder Showdown

UP THE slope, the skyline was alive with painted Navajos, warriors swooping down toward the outlaws. But there was little hope in that. Bob Pryor knew that as he heard Murratt's hoarse shout.

"Half of yuh take care of them Injuns! They ain't got many guns. There's enough of us to clean out them arrow-shooters and Pryor's outfit both!"

That was true. There were only a few guns among Kuchene's warriors, and it was sheer slaughter when the outlaw weapons swiveled on the Navajos. Five Indians were knocked down in the first blare of shots. One of the killers whooped with evil mirth.

"Like shootin' cans off a log!"

The deadly shooting of the killer gang broke the wild charge of the Navajos. The Indians whirled back up the slope, but almost instantly came plunging toward the outlaws again in another reckless charge. Their arrows were futile against the smashing lead of the outlaws, however, in spite of the frantic shooting of the men around the Rio Kid who tried to support the Indians.

The line of Navajos thinned with deadly rapidity under the vicious hail of lead that ripped into them. Their charge broke again, but the Kid knew they were not finished. Old Kuchene would rally his warriors, and continue their mad charges until they had overcome the outlaws or every Navajo was wiped out.

Even as the Indians reformed their ranks, and started down the slope, the Rio Kid went plunging through the creek behind freshly loaded guns.

"This way, Murratt! Around here, cuss yuh!"

Celestino's high-pitched cry ripped through the crashing of the battle.

"Wait, General! Wait for me!"

Ed Schieffelin and Broncho Charlie Miller and Billy Breakenridge seemed to be shouting with the same raucous voice.

"Slow up, Pryor! Yuh think this is yore own private fight?"

Pryor heard the men kicking through the water behind him, but he didn't slow his hard run up the steep slope. He saw the outlaws above him whirl to meet the new and more deadly danger that threatened them. This was different from knocking down Navajos who were armed only with bows and arrows.

They swiveled their crashing guns. But even as they spun, the Indians were pounding closer to them. They were caught in the middle, whip-sawed!

But they didn't give up, in spite of the terror that was plain in them. Only one thing lay in store for them if they were captured alive—the ropes of the Law. They had lived by their guns, and now they were ready to die by them, snarling and fighting like wolves at bay.

The arrows of the Navajos closing in took an even greater toll than the guns of the Rio Kid and his friends. One by one the outlaw killers fell.

Lash Murratt was the last to go down. He saw his end before it came. He tried to flee through the rocks, and Pryor could have shot the killer leader down, but he held his fire. Old Kuchene came racing down the slope behind a leveled war lance, cutting off the outlaw's escape. Murratt whirled, fired at the Navajo chief, but terror threw his slug wild. The next instant Kuchene's lance rammed home.

IT WAS over then, and a moment later the Navajo chief dismounted and moved toward the Rio Kid.

"How!" he said gravely.

The Rio Kid smiled. "Kuchene," he said, "I reckon yuh couldn't have come at a better time for yore revenge. I don't need to say we're all obliged to yuh. What I can't figure though, is why yuh didn't ride with us."

The chief smiled with a Navajo's pride.

"Kuchene follows his own trail for his revenge," he said. He swung his hand in a slow gesture. "White friends come now. Kuchene will guide them across the desert."

The Rio Kid's mouth thinned out, and he shook his head grimly.

"I've got one more job to take care of first!" he said quietly.

He turned, but big John Cudahay seemed to read his thoughts. Cudahay jumped forward, spinning Dave Hayden around savagely.

"Turn around here, yuh doublecrosser!" the big man yelled. "I want to watch yore face when I throw lead into yore middle!"

Dave Hayden whirled as though cut by a whip, his face draining gray-white. Sarah Cudahay leaped to her father's side, her cry slicing through the sudden fall of silence.

"Dad! What are you doing!"

His eyes narrow and cold, Pryor watched Russ Pierce brush a nervous hand across his forehead, leaving a long black streak on his sweaty skin. He heard Hayden's yell.

"Cudahay, what in blazes is eatin' you! I didn't—"

It was then that the Rio Kid broke in. His voice was quiet, low, but there was more of a threat in it than if it had been a

shout. It caught at both men, pulled them around toward him, tense and strained.

"Cudahay, yuh'd better pull in yore horns before yuh do something yuh'll regret," he said firmly.

A dark flush rose in the big man's face. "Pryor, are yuh hoppin' across the fence?" he blared. "Yuh said yoreself—"

The Rio Kid silenced Cudahay with a wave of his hand.

"That it was Hayden's gun I found that started yore war?" he said. "Shore it was. That it looked like Hayden had rigged up that arrow to send Murratt here to meet us? Shore, I said that! But I've changed my tune since then."

He whipped around suddenly, contempt and hatred turning his voice harsh.

"Pierce!" he ripped out. "Are yuh pullin' yore gun now, or do I take yuh in to hang?"

Russ Pierce's face turned a dirty white under the whip-lash of the Rio Kid's accusation. He fell back a step as though the impact of Pryor's voice had been an actual blow. Then he caught himself, kinking forward slightly from the waist, his black-smudged right hand hooked out just over the butt of his Colt.

A SNEER was on his lips and in his drawl.

"Yuh're goin' to jaw yoreself into some trouble if yuh ain't careful," he said derisively.

The Rio Kid cursed. "So yuh think yuh can still run yore bluff!" he rasped. "All right, killer, I'll lay it out cold for yuh. You stirred up that war yesterday just to get everybody killed off so's you'd be left with the gold. Yuh'd have done it sooner, if yuh hadn't needed everybody else in the canyon. Yuh couldn't raise food and spin thread for clothes for yoreself, so yuh waited seven years to start yore war.

"Yesterday yuh figgured it wouldn't be long before them golden eagles would be killed, and help would come this way. So it was time to wipe out the canyon folks. Yuh stole Hayden's rifle, and rigged up that murder contraption. Only yuh should have stole some rawhide, too, because that's one thing that started me thinkin'. There was three burned spots, part of a steer brand, on that rawhide yuh used on that murder gun."

"Meanin' what?" Pierce sneered.

"Meanin' that strip of rawhide came from one of yore own steers," the Rio Kid declared flatly. "I didn't catch on till yesterday when I ran into one of yore steer, after pullin' the rope down from the cliff. Then I remembered the scars on the raw-

[*Turn page*]

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hide thong when I saw yore brand. Them three scars are spaced just far enough apart to match up with yore RP brand, and they don't tally with Hayden's DH, or any other brand in the canyon. I checked, and I know!"

RUSS PIERCE laughed derisively. "Which proves Hayden was tryin' to frame me," he mocked.

"Then what does the rest of this prove, killer?" the Rio Kid said sternly. "The other night yuh came to my campfire sayin' yuh was goin' to make peace with Hayden. Yuh said yuh'd spent the afternoon at the north end of the canyon, but yuh lied. I was up thataway, and yuh wasn't there.

"I'll tell yuh where yuh went. Yuh climbed up the rope and started the fire back from the rim that led Murratt to the canyon. He wouldn't have found the place if he hadn't been tipped off. I noticed the fire glow just before the moon came up, but it died out before I caught on. Yeah, yuh lit that brush fire to lead Murratt and his gunnies here."

"Yuh make it sound good," Pierce sneered. The ugly glint that marked the born-killer was beginning to burn in his eyes.

"I'll make it sound better," the Rio Kid ripped out. "Yuh had rope burns on yore hands from that trip up and down the wall. Yuh had hemp threads on yore shirt cuffs. Yeah, and yuh tore yore jeans comin' down the rope on the same rock snag I tore mine on. Yuh want to take a look, killer?"

Pierce didn't drop his eyes. His mouth was thinning out, a knife-slash across his dark face. He seemed to have stopped breathing, keying nerve and muscle for the violence that was coming.

The Rio Kid's voice was deceptively soft when he spoke again.

"Yuh did all that, and one thing more. Yuh pinned out that sheet on Cudahay's cabin roof to tip Murratt off how we planned to leave the canyon. And it was you that said we ought to be on guard when we floated out of the cavern because yuh knew Murratt would be waitin'!

"Yuh was throwin' everything into a long chance. Yuh wanted us wiped out, and yuh wanted Murratt's gang wiped out. Yuh didn't trust Murratt to cut yuh in, so the only way yuh could have got the gold was to have both outfits killed off.

"Yeah, yuh made that arrow on the sheet with stove soot, killer. And soot is hard to wipe off once yuh get it on yore hands. Yuh ought to know that, Pierce. Yuh've still got it on yore hands!"

THAT last came with explosive suddenness. Pierce's hand smashed down, and whipped up, a flash of speed that almost matched the blue-blur of the Rio Kid's draw. There was not a heartbeat between the twin roar of their shots.

Pryor saw a thin gout of dust puff from the front of the killer's shirt, felt the hot whip of Pierce's close-passing slug. Pierce rocked back on his heels, amazement and horror knocking the murder lust out of his face.

He looked around at the staring faces turned toward him, and he seemed not to see them. His crouch deepened, and he seemed to reach for the ground to brace himself. His arms wilted under his dead weight. He didn't move after he finished his fall.

Through the heavy hush, Pryor heard Billy Breakenridge's complaining growl.

"Dang it, a man ought to know better than try to match lead with the Rio Kid."

Regret that always came after he had been forced to use his guns passed through the Rio Kid. He turned slowly, seeing Celestino Mireles close to his side, just now relaxing.

"What now, my General?" the young Mexican murmured.

The Rio Kid shrugged. He shifted his glance to the Navajo chief.

"Ready tuh guide us across the desert, Kuchene?" he asked quietly. "There'll be more work somewhere for us. I reckon Celestino and me had better start lookin' for it."

Coming Next Issue

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 12)

Then it was that men like John Chisum found a market for cattle, not to the North, but to the West, to the Indian reservations and the forts, and then Dodge City, Baxter Springs, and the new railroad markets of the North. Then came a great era of cattle prosperity, and men made fortunes selling steers at twenty dollars a head and driving them in some instances more than a thousand miles to these markets.

When he first settled in New Mexico, the Pecos Valley, where he located his cattle empire, was wild country. The Mescalero Apaches, in their mountain fastnesses to the west, looked upon his invading herds as fair prey for constant plundering raids. Mexican marauders came frequently on whirlwind forays across the Rio Grande and raced back with great numbers of his cattle and horses.

White rustlers were busy and, in the long run, his herds suffered more serious losses from their depredations than from those of Mexicans and Indians.

His first big government contract called for the delivery of ten thousand cattle to Fort Sumner, which were to feed approximately ten thousand Indians who were held at the fort as government wards.

While this number of cattle were fattening on his Bosque Grande ranges, more than half of them were stolen and he had to bring in another herd from Texas, had to bring them over the trail and across

[*Turn page*]

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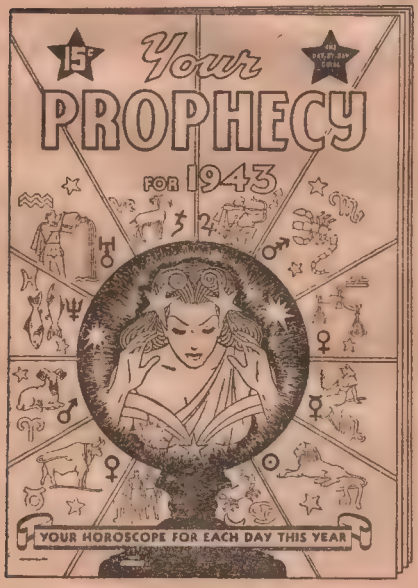

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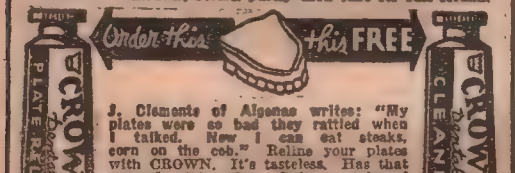

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the Pecos at Horse Heads Crossing, a place which made even a large group of men with a herd of cattle at a distinct disadvantage in combating even a few men determined to take those cattle from their rightful owners.

It is perhaps safe to say that there were more herds on trail raided, more men killed in such raids at Horse Heads Crossing, than at any other given spot along the trails from the Gulf Coast of Texas to Dodge City, or from North Central Texas across to New Mexico and Arizona.

No Rosy Road

It was no rosy road to success that was traveled by John Chisum and he no doubt knew it when he embarked in the cattle business, but he was of that kind of stock that will not admit defeat, will not give up. When he started to Fort Stanton, with eleven hundred steers to fill an order, he was set upon by Apaches while going through the passes of the Guadalupe Mountains, and was lucky to arrive at the fort with six steers and his own scalp still intact. But he would not quit.

Occasions like this only served to make him more determined to fight through to the end. Once, when Mexican freebooters from across the Rio Grande rounded up twelve hundred head of his horses and started back with their booty, Chisum and four of his men followed their trail and, overtaking them at Horse Heads Crossing, killed three of the robbers and recovered the herd.

Chisum abandoned Bosque Grande as his headquarters in 1873 and, moving down the Pecos forty miles, established South Springs Ranch, which remained his home to the end of his life.

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An Oasis of Beauty

He sowed eight hundred acres of alfalfa. He brought fruit trees from Arkansas and set out a vast acreage in orchards of apple, pear and plum. He imported roses from Texas to make a hedge about the house, and scarlet tanagers and bob-white quail from Tennessee—birds unknown to New Mexico—and set them at liberty in the oasis of beauty he had created.

In the planting of three young cottonwoods he bent and tied together their tops, causing them to grow into one mammoth tree with a triple arch of trunks, which throughout the years has stood as a monument to his love of nature and beauty.

In his great, rambling, one-story adobe house, with verandas at front and rear, which was near the main road from Texas to New Mexico, Chisum dispensed frontier hospitality with an almost royal manner. The stranger was as free as the invited guest to bed and board as long as he wanted to stay, and no money or questions asked. Every day at breakfast, dinner and supper, the table in the dining hall was set for twenty-six guests and hardly a meal was ever served at which all the chairs were not occupied.

Men of All Kinds

Guests at the South Springs Ranch included every man worth knowing in the Southwest, and many not worth knowing. They included governors, legislators, business men, army officers, gamblers, robbers and murderers, but he treated them all alike. While they were under his roof they were treated with courtesy and respect; what they were made no difference in their welcome.

Sometimes a man would ride up in a hurry, eat a meal quickly, and depart in a rush. A sheriff's posse trailing in a little later would give a clue to his haste. The length of a guest's visit sometimes depended upon how many jumps he was ahead of the sheriff.

Billy the Kid, one of the most outstandingly notorious characters of the West, was a friend of John Chisum and often visited at the ranch for a week or so. What happened to Billy the Kid and his part in the great Lincoln range war is another story that will have to be told later. Sheriff Pat Garrett, the man who killed Billy the Kid, was also a frequent visitor at Chisum's.

Gone—But Remembered

John Chisum has long since passed on to the round-up in the sky. The land that

[*Turn page*]

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once comprised the South Springs Ranch is still there, but the longhorns have vanished, and pure-bred Herefords now graze on the broad acres. The cottonwoods still stand, the fragrance of roses still comes from the hedges that were started by the old cattle king. Scarlet descendants of the birds Chisum brought from Tennessee, the tanagers, swing from tree to bush like darts of living flame, and bob-whites set memories of the old cattle king to music as their liquid yodel rings over all the valley.

Gone is the famous brand of John Chisum, the more famous ear-crop known as the Jingle-bob, and if they have not been cleared away within the past few years there are still the crumbling fragments of the old adobe ranchhouse, where within its walls were love, romance, tragedy, where the great, the near-great and the notorious met and were always welcome regardless of their social standing. It is all that is left of the palace, the throne of one of the greatest of cattle kings. But he will always be remembered. *Adios!*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

DURING the stormy years following the Civil War the frenzied era of railroad construction brought tremendous changes to the Western frontier.

New territory was being opened up for settlement. Towns mushroomed out of empty prairies. Surveyors, engineers and graders battled the wilderness, hewing out a path for the gleaming ribbons of steel that were soon to span the continent, linking the East with the Far West.

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The railroads, granted huge land subsidies by the government, pushed on relentlessly. But their construction required an army of men. Graders, spikers, tie-layers —laborers of all descriptions—in addition to surveyors, engineers, buffalo hunters and trouble shooters, were needed to maintain the uninterrupted march of steel.

Those laborers were rough, unsentimental men who worked hard and fought hard, living a turbulent, reckless existence. The problem of transporting food for these thousands of men was so serious that the railroads hired buffalo hunters to secure enough meat to feed them.

As the railroads advanced, shack towns sprang up at the various grading and rail camps, designed to cater to the wants of the workers in their hours of relaxation. These were typical boom towns, consisting mainly of saloons and honkatonks and cluttered with gamblers, land sharks and border riffraff who preyed upon the laborers, seeking their hard-earned wages.

Yet, even greater than the menace of such ruthless schemers, was the danger of raids by Indians who resented the advent of the railroads because it meant the loss of their native hunting grounds. Detachments of soldiers were needed to guard the right of way, and gun-hung trouble-shooters moved through the tent towns to keep order—when they could.

It was a lusty, tumultuous era marked by violence and bloodshed, by untold hardships, by repeated Indian raids and by political chicanery. But America was young and strong and its pioneers unswerving in their determination to open the frontier and unite the nation.

Best known among the early railroads was the Union Pacific, and before its gleaming rails had spanned the country, it was obliged to run a gauntlet of perils and obstacles almost unparalleled in history.

In one of these Union Pacific grading camps Arthur Harvest bid well to become a power in the West. Owner of a prosperous tent saloon as well as a rich grading contract with the railroad, he was in an en-

[*Turn page*]

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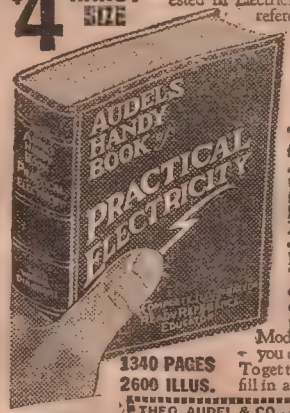

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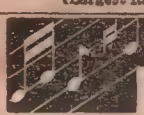

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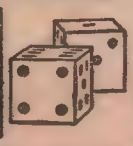
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viable position. But he was not content. The greed for money and power was a poison in his blood, turning him ruthless and destructive.

And the night young Bob Stillwell, buffalo hunter and prairie scout, builds a hundred-dollar stake at cards into several thousand dollars in winning, then quits the game, Harvest shows his true colors. An order goes out to several of Harvest's gunslick henchmen to follow Stillwell, kill him, steal his money and leave evidence to make it appear that Sioux Indians were responsible.

In the midst of the cowardly attack there is an interruption as two men appear out of the darkness with guns flaming ruddily in their fists. The newcomers—Bob Pryor, better known as the Rio Kid, and his faithful aide, Celestino Mireles—counter-attack so savagely that the renegades are driven off.

Trivial as the affair seems to the Rio Kid at the time, it serves as his grim introduction to greater perils to come, planned acts of violence and destruction against the Union Pacific, and makes RIDER OF STEEL by Tom Curry, the smashing action novel in the next issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN, a completely thrilling and entertaining story.

Spurring recklessly into the saloon, Bob Pryor informs the brawny laborers of the attempt on Stillwell's life and states he is after Blacky, the leader of the killers. In the scene of confusion that follows, Pryor is almost shot in the back, but the timely intervention of an old friend, General George "Sandy" Forsyth of Civil War fame, saves his life.

Although Pryor fails to get Blacky or his boss, he does tangle with Harvest several days later when the saloon owner makes a bold try with paid gun hellions to swing a county seat election held in the town of Sheridan over to his own town, Harvestburg.

Pryor, backed by the presence of Mireles, Forsyth and Stillwell, drives the hoodlums away and humiliates Arthur Harvest. Later, he uses his influence to get the Union Pacific to cancel Harvest's grading contract because of Harvest's trouble-making.

That move by the Rio Kid brings out all the latent wickedness in Harvest and he vows vengeance against Pryor and the entire railroad.

From that moment the story builds swiftly from one tense action climax to another. The town of Sheridan is assaulted by savages who are supplied with rifles through the crooked conniving of Arthur Harvest. Part of the town is set afire before the Indians, led by that dreaded Cheyenne chief, Roman Nose, flee at the approach of the Rio Kid and a small detachment of cavalry troopers.

Later, Pryor makes a bold raid upon Harvest's camp, discovers a cache of Springfield rifles, but he fails to capture the renegade leader. Growing bolder all the time, Harvest even arranges a daring theft of rifles and ammunition from Fort Wallace.

Determined to bring the raids to an end, the Rio Kid, Forsyth and the rest of his friends start in pursuit. And as they ride they learn that Roman Nose and his legion of Sioux, Cheyennes and Dog Soldiers, are leaving a red path of ruin in their wake, attacking and killing small outlying settlements.

Suddenly and without warning, the troopers gallop into a clever ambush set by the Indians. Then follow many days of torture and hardship and death while the Rio Kid and the blue-clad soldiers are marooned on Beecher's Island, desperately staving off complete annihilation by the Indians.

Never has there been a more dramatic account of this siege famous in frontier history. For days on end—through blistering heat, with the stench of their dead horses threatening to cause an epidemic, and with the assaults by the Indians coming at regular intervals—the troopers fight to hold the island.

Each day their numbers are depleted and their ammunition and food grow less, with the only hope lying in possible help from Fort Wallace—if they were able to send someone through the deadly cordon of savages. Several attempts are made but without success—but still they must try:

The following morn the Indians again surrounded the island, but they did not charge. Instead, they dismounted and poured in bullets from a safe distance. During the night, men had worked on the mounds and made them stronger and higher, and they had protection from such fire.

When darkness fell Forsyth selected two more

[*Turn page*]

O. SOGLOW

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men to try to get through to Fort Wallace.

The Rio Kid would not leave his comrades, wishing to share their fate, whatever it might be. He was glad when Forsyth, knowing his nature, did not designate him to go.

The scouts crept out, as had the unfortunate Tradeau and Stillwell. Two hours went by, and then the guards on the isle heard the sound of shooting and Indian cries.

Half an hour later the two scouts came running full-tilt back to the camp. They had bumped into an iron-clad ring of savages, and nearly lost their scalps. One had been seared across the cheek by an Indian slug.

Again daylight came, with more shooting and more attempts against them by the overwhelming number of redmen.

Pinned to the spot by his wounded, lacking horses, Sandy Forsyth could only wait—hold out as long as possible.

The above passage taken out of the story will give the reader some idea of the grim death trap in which the Rio Kid and the troopers were caught. How they finally break the siege and then sweep on to capture Harvest makes the novel RIDER OF STEEL a story that all readers will long remember.

Besides General Forsyth and Roman Nose, other famous characters of Western history who cross trails with the Rio Kid in this absorbing yarn are General Phil Sheridan, General George Custer and Lt. Fred Beecher, nephew of the famous divine, Henry Ward Beecher.

In addition to RIDER OF STEEL the next issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN will contain a generous assortment of action-packed short stories. And, of course, your old friend, Foghorn Clancy, will be back to entertain everyone with his department, The Bunkhouse.

Readers, please don't hesitate to write in to us to express your feelings about the contents of our magazine. We wish to know when the stories please you—also when they don't. Address all letters and postcards to The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. Here are excerpts from a few letters we have received recently:

Just thought I'd drop you a line to let you know that I thought GUNS OF DODGE CITY, by Tom Curry, and HIGH WIRE AND HOT LEAD, by C. William Harrison, were two of the best Rio Kid novels I've ever read in a long time—and I've read every issue of your magazine since the first one reached the stands.

One thing I like about those stories is that I can learn some facts about the people and events of the Frontier West—things that actually happened, and people who really lived—while enjoying a good fiction story. My only regret is that the magazine does not come out often enough for me.

Tom Tyne.
Woodside, N. Y.

A lot of our readers feel the same way you do, Tom, about the Rio Kid novels and we're happy to have your support. From our experience Curry and Harrison can usually be relied on to come through with entertaining yarns.

Now here's a letter in a slightly different tone. But we take the bad with the good:

Although I usually enjoy the Rio Kid novels, I can't say the same for some of the short stories which have recently appeared in your magazine. Several of the recent ones have been rather slow and they didn't have enough action for me. Besides, why not keep them all stories of the Old

West, instead of ringing in modern yarns every so often?

Pete Hollan.

Denver, Colo.

Sorry, Pete, but we disagree with you in your complaint. Most of our readers think our short stories pack just as much action as the featured novels do. And we can assure you that we try to make every story that appears in our magazine fast-moving and thoroughly entertaining. As for the modern angle, we think it a good idea to ring in a story of the new West at intervals, for the sake of variety in the contents of an issue.

After staying up until well past midnight to read LEADVILLE AVENGERS, by Tom Curry, and enjoying it immensely, I thought I'd lose a little more sleep and let you know that it was tops with me.

It's seldom that any story can keep me reading that way, but LEADVILLE AVENGERS certainly did.

Ed Reeber.

Chicago, Ill.

Glad to hear from you, Ed. Write us again when you get the chance. We're relaying your sentiments to Senor Tom Curry and we're sure he'll get a kick out of knowing you liked his novel so much.

Since there's no more room for publishing further letters, we'll have to call it a day. We'll be back next issue with another preview of a featured novel as well as excerpts from as many letters as we can find room to print.

And don't forget America's pledge—ten per cent of every person's income in U. S. War Bonds and Stamps! Keep 'em flying!

—THE EDITOR.

P.S. Readers are urged to contribute to the 1943 VICTORY BOOK CAMPAIGN, sponsored by the American Library Association, the American Red Cross and the United Service Organizations. Current best sellers, adventure, western and detective stories, technical books and humorous books are all in demand by members of our armed services. The books you wish to donate are being collected at your local library, or any designated collection agency in your locality. They are promptly forwarded to our fighting men.

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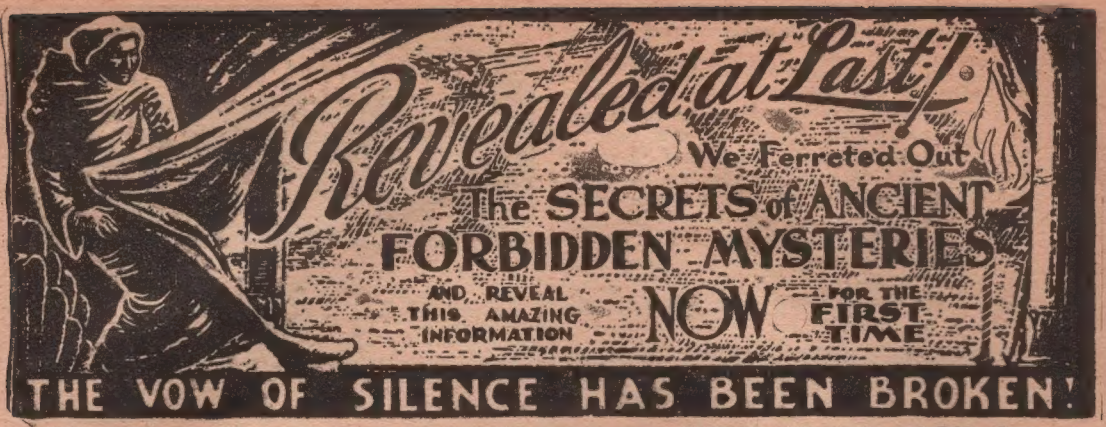

"The 7 Keys to Power alleges to teach," the author says, "All the Mysteries of Life from the Cradle to the Grave—and Beyond. It claims to tell you the particular day and hour to do anything you desire, whether it be in the light of the moon, sun, or in total darkness."

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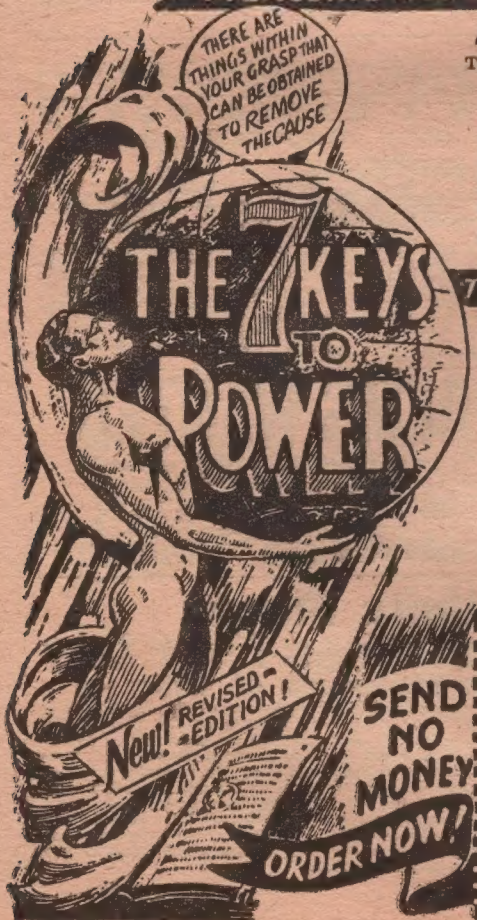
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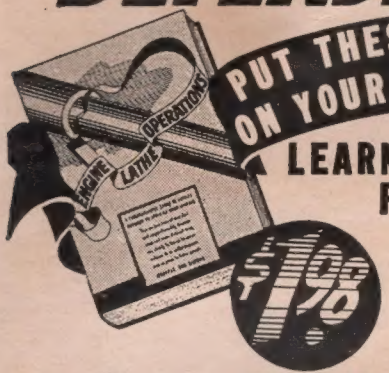

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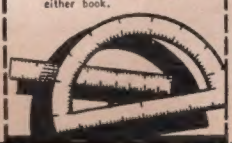

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